

The background of the cover is a romantic scene from the anime 'Sword of the Demon Hunter'. It depicts the characters Kuin and Gentōshō in a misty, blue-toned forest. Kuin, a man with dark hair in a blue robe, stands behind Gentōshō, a woman with long black hair in a white and red kimono. They are embracing in a shallow stream or pond. The water is calm, reflecting the characters and the surrounding trees. Red petals or leaves are scattered on the water's surface. The overall atmosphere is serene and romantic, with a soft blue glow permeating the scene.

Sword
of the Demon
Hunter KUIN
GENTŌSHŌ

BOOK 3

BY Motoo Nakanishi



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Sword of the Demon Hunter: Kijin Gentōshō (Light Novel) Vol. 3

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KUIN
GENTOSHŌ

BOOK
3

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Nakanishi



Seven Seas Entertainment

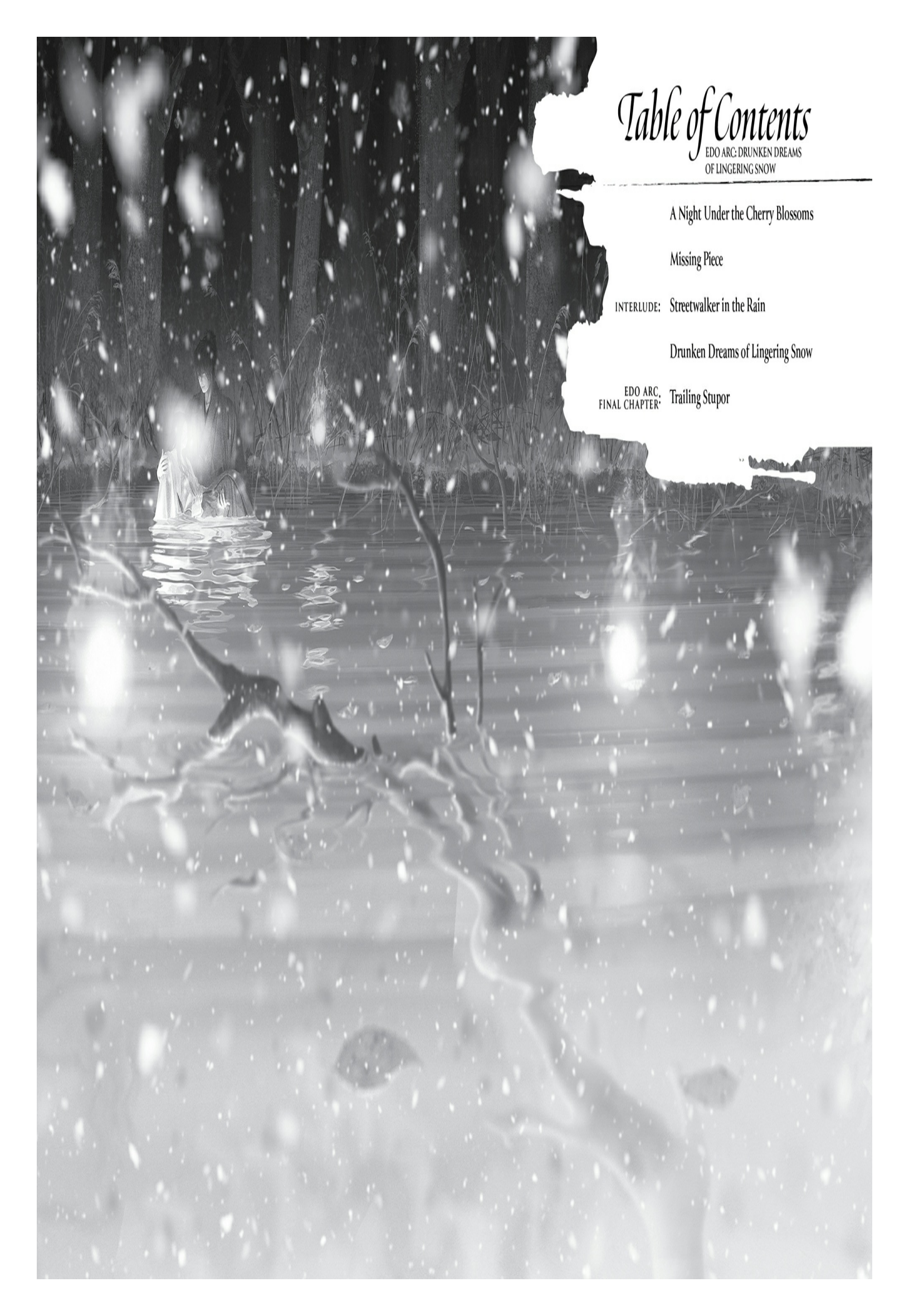


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EDO ARC,
FINAL CHAPTER: Trailing Stupor

Character List

JINYA: A ronin who makes his living by hunting demons, despite being a demon himself. Currently gathering strength to face the Demon God in Kadono in 170 years' time.

JYUUZOU: Owner of Sugaya, a store in Nihonbashi. Father of Jinya, who ran away at age five.

NATSU: Jyuuzou's only daughter. Adopted, making her Jinya's adoptive sister by extension.

ZENJI: Employee at Sugaya. Prone to making gaffes.

MIURA NAOTSUGU: Eldest son of the Miura family, who are retainers to the shogunate. Works as a secretary in Edo Castle.

OFUU: Sadanaga's daughter and a waitress at Kihee. A demon.

STREETWALKER: A street prostitute in the Yoshiwara area.

AKITSU SOMEGOROU The third person to inherit the
THE THIRD: name of master metalworker Akitsu Somegorou.

SUZUNE: Jinya's sister by birth. A demon, and the one who killed Shirayuki, the woman Jinya loved. Her whereabouts have remained unknown since the tragedy of Kadono.

The Edo Arc

A Night Under the Cherry Blossoms

IT WAS SPRING in the seventh year of the Kaei era (1854 AD).

In the drizzle of an early spring rain, a man unsheathed the sword at his hip. With a step forward, he slashed down upon his target. What he'd bisected wasn't human, but a hideous fiend. The man showed no fear before it—nor any emotion at all, in fact. He flicked the blood off his blade and sheathed it as he watched white vapor rise from its fading corpse.

In Edo, where spirits freely marched the streets in droves by night, a certain rumor floated—one of a Yasha guardian that hunted Edo's demons. This was no baseless rumor.

The man's name was Jinya. He was a peculiar ronin who, as the rumors claimed, could slay a demon in a single strike. Tonight—as with many other nights—he had heard a passing rumor of a demon sighting and had proceeded to make quick work of it. The conclusion was a sight all too familiar to him now.

"Oh my... What an elegant scene I've stumbled upon."

What made this night unusual, however, was the presence of a strange woman. Despite having witnessed the ghastly end met by the corpse before Jinya, she showed an inviting, coquettish grin.

"...How so?" he asked.

"There's a demon caught in a drizzle and a sword being swung in a beautiful crescent, like the moon. What is that if not elegant?"

He turned sharply to look at her, but she didn't cower before his gaze. She wore a ragged robe that had clearly been shoddy even brand new. Her body, wet with rain, was worryingly thin, and her skin sickly pale. She looked to be one or two years older than Natsu and carried herself with the air of one who made a living enticing men.

"...You're a streetwalker?"

"That I am. I haven't had much luck with customers today, so I thought I'd

move to this riverbank. I'm glad I did, as I got to see something quite nice."

A streetwalker was a prostitute who sought clients on the streets. Unlike their oiran courtesan counterparts who lived lives of luxury in the Yoshiwara red-light district, streetwalkers were the lowest class of prostitute, living in poverty and selling their bodies for cheap. As most streetwalkers could not afford makeup or proper clothing, and many older ones had blemished skin, they only worked at night when the darkness served to hide their appearance.

The one before Jinya now had the poor, disheveled appearance of the streetwalkers he'd seen before. Her face was beautiful, although not terribly so. Notably, she lacked the tired look that many in her trade had, and didn't take that self-abasing, fawning tone often used by those trying to coax clients.

"While we're here, any interest in buying some time with me?" she asked.

"I'll have to decline. I'll be leaving now, if that's all."

What a strange woman, Jinya mused, then thought nothing further of her. A beautiful streetwalker was uncommon, yes, but nothing of particular interest to him. Meeting Ofuu and the others had changed him, but not to the point where he suddenly wanted to buy a companion for the night.

What she said as he moved to leave, however, stopped him in his tracks. "Aw, what a shame. I have to say, I'm a bit surprised though. I thought the rumored Yasha guardian would be more intimidating, but it seems he has the lost look of a stranded child."

She regarded him not with the fear one usually had after watching him slay a demon but with amusement. Her words didn't irk him, however, as she was right. *Human, for what purpose do you wield your blade?* Even now, he still had no answer to that question posed to him long ago. If this woman said he looked lost, then it must be so.

He asked, "What makes you say that?"

"When you've been in my line of work for a while, you get good at reading men," she said, with an inviting smile. "I'd normally avoid pointing out such things, but I get the impression you're not the type to throw a fuss over it."

She had read Jinya like an open book. With his youth far behind him, he

thought he'd grown better at hiding his true self, but she saw through him like it was nothing. His face remained stoic, but discomfort stirred within.

As if picking up on his discomfort, the streetwalker shrugged noncommittally. "I'm sorry, I didn't intend to tease. I have some actual business with you, really," she said listlessly as her fingers danced seductively, caressing the air. "There's been a rumor among us streetwalkers lately: rumor of a demon under the cherry blossoms."

The rumor began with another streetwalker. According to her, a number of men had been killed on a dim path as they returned from Yoshiwara, Edo's biggest red-light district. It bustled with activity every night, but even its cheapest establishments were unbearably expensive. Commoners went to ogle at the high-class courtesans, but often left without doing a single thing. Streetwalkers aimed to make such men their clients, enticing them as they made their way home from Yoshiwara.

The streetwalker who started the rumors was one such woman. She had been loitering about on a dim path looking for customers when she spotted a man standing under a half-blooming cherry blossom tree. She approached him, thinking she had found a potential client, only to notice another woman by his side. She saw that the woman's clothing was in tatters and assumed she was another streetwalker. As she turned to back away, the man suddenly collapsed. The woman held a bloody kitchen knife as the man lay lifeless, his heart pierced. The woman looked up, revealing her hideous face.

Thereafter, there were many more accounts of a hideous demon woman killing men under the cherry blossom tree. Now, none went near it at night.

"We streetwalkers hear all kinds of pillow talk. Even the men returning from Yoshiwara have begun to speak of this rumor. Since you're the demon-hunting Yasha guardian everyone's talking about, maybe you could do something about it?"

"I don't work for free."

"But of course. I'll pay you, though I must ask you temper your expectations a little for me."

Jinya was mainly tackling these demons to gain strength—money was only a

secondary concern. But he asked for money anyway, just to probe how much the woman wanted this case resolved. Although she'd replied without hesitation, he saw her stiffen for a brief instant. She clearly didn't have much money to spare, judging from the state of her attire, yet her willingness to hire him was clear. He found this suspicious. "Why go to such lengths for this rumor?"

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know? ...Is what I would say, but it'd be a problem if my teasing chased you off." Understanding that he doubted her motives, she softly sighed and closed her eyes. "I have no particular reason. As a fellow woman, I'd just like to see her pass on." For a brief moment, she appeared not a streetwalker but an ordinary woman. From the sound of things, she had a general idea of what the demon's true nature was.

"...Just who are you?" Jinya murmured absently.

"Me? What do you mean?" It was clear she had no intent of giving an honest answer. The ordinary woman was gone, and a common streetwalker had reclaimed her place. With a soft smile, she answered, "I'm a streetwalker, nothing more. If you must call me something, then let that be my name —'Streetwalker.'"

He looked at the pale woman, caught in the light rain, and wondered: If anything were to be called elegant, would it not be her?

"What's up? Is there something on my face?"

The next day, he went to Kihee—the soba restaurant—and found Natsu there. He sat with her and ate soba. Nothing about that was unusual, but the events of the prior night flitted through his mind, and he inadvertently began to stare at Natsu.

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't mean to stare," he said.

"It's fine. Something happen?"

"Kind of."

He said nothing further, prompting Natsu to cock her head in wonder. She

was seventeen now, if his memory served correctly. She was a little past the age to be called a young girl, but she still wore her heart on her sleeve and had the absentmindedness, and kindness, of a child. In contrast, the streetwalker he met last night was calm and composed, yet so brazenly proved she could see right through him.

Curiously, she didn't irk him, though. He merely thought she was strange, as well as found it odd to think that she was probably Natsu's senior by only a small margin.

"Careful, Ofuu. Your man's going to be swiped right out from under you if you're not careful."

"Dad, what are you talking about?"

The father-daughter pair were the same as ever. Knowing part of their past now, Jinya found the sight of them chatting all the more heartwarming.

The restaurant owner had taken an odd liking to Jinya since their first meeting, which Jinya now understood to be because the man had realized he was a demon. Being a demon like Ofuu, as well as a rather rational person, Jinya probably met the bare minimum of whatever the man was looking for in a potential husband for his daughter. Still, even with that in mind, he was *far* too eager to pair them off. Even Ofuu seemed exasperated by her father's offbeat comments.

"So, Jinya-kun, what manner of business are you workin' on this time?" the restaurant owner asked as he brought out tea. He seemed to have picked up that something was going on from the way Jinya was acting.

Jinya hesitated for a moment. Streetwalkers were the lowest caste of prostitutes, reviled even by commoners—especially by women. Jinya didn't think Natsu and Ofuu were the judgmental type, but he was still hesitant to bring up that he'd accepted a job from a streetwalker.

"What's up? Did you take on another dangerous request?" Natsu asked.

"Now, now, you two." Ofuu chided them.

Jinya was grateful for her consideration, but this request could have something to do with the aforementioned cherry blossom tree. Thinking Ofuu

might notice something he missed, he decided to tell them of the request he took, omitting some minor details. He told them about the men killed by a hideous demon underneath a cherry blossom tree at night, and he told them the request came from someone who, as a fellow woman, simply wanted to see the demon pass on.

“As a fellow woman, you say?” Ofuu remarked.

“Yeah. Ring any bells?”

“Not really... Maybe if it were a camellia tree instead of a cherry blossom tree.”

She had taught him about camellias already. Camellias were five-petaled flowers that bloomed in the spring sun and ranged in color from light crimson to white. They’d been a beloved subject of poets since time immemorial, even from the time of *Manyoshu* poetry in the 8th century. When camellia season ended, the flowers fell as one whole instead of scattering by the petal. This unique trait was thought by some to be endearing and elegant and thought by others to be ominous as it resembled one being beheaded.

“Why a camellia?” he asked.

“They say the souls of the dead reside in old camellia trees, and that those souls take the form of spirits to deceive humans. All the related tales are quite old, but these souls are generally always women. Very beautiful women at that.” Ofuu also mentioned the possibility that the men were lured to the cherry blossom tree from somewhere else.

The restaurant owner then recounted a story he knew regarding cherry blossom trees. “Cherry blossom trees call to mind the story of Saigyō and the Cherry Blossom Tree, that *noh* theater play where the soul of an old cherry blossom tree appears. Apparently, people used to think old trees had souls that became spirits and such.” While you wouldn’t guess it from his usual behavior, the restaurant owner was originally born to a samurai family and had a cultured upbringing because of it.

“The soul of a cherry blossom tree, huh...” Jinya quietly pondered the idea for a while. It had an aesthetic ring to it, but it wasn’t quite what he was looking for. His rumor concerned a hideous demon woman, and one that had killed

many men in cold blood at that.

Still, there was no knowing what might turn out to be useful, so he stored the information in a corner of his mind. Now all that was left was to visit the cherry blossom tree in question.

If one walked past the Look-back Willow along Emon Hill, then snaked along Gojyukken Path, they would reach the grand gate of Yoshiwara. This sizable wooden gate marked the border between reality outside and the world of dreams that was the red-light district within.

The original Yoshiwara had burned down in the Great Fire of Meireki and was moved to Nihonzutsumi of Sensouji-ura, a location that was nothing but empty farmland at the time. Urban development brought roads leading to Nihonzutsumi, but the location remained regarded as a distant, backwater place on the outskirts of the capital city. Because of that, if one wandered off the road leading to it, they'd find quiet paths devoid of other people. The cherry blossom tree from the rumors was on such a path, sequestered far from the splendors of the red-light district.

The old cherry blossom tree was speckled with sporadic light pink flowers. Perhaps because it was still midday, the cherry blossom flowers lacked the bewitching beauty for which they were generally known. In fact, the sight of the old tree trying its best to bloom was faintly saddening. At any rate, the tree lacked the eerie feel of an object that might harbor a wicked spirit that attacked people.

"Quite the charming spot," Ofuu commented from beside Jinya. It was unusual to go admire the cherry blossoms while the sun was so high, but of course, the two were here because of the rumor about the tree, not to admire flowers. Ofuu had tagged along, insisting it would surely be safe during the daytime.

Jinya was disappointed. Despite all the talk of souls in old camellia and cherry blossom trees, the actual tree in question was normal, and normal enough for Ofuu to speak affectionately of it. He said, "So the demon woman and the cherry blossoms have nothing to do with one another then."

“Perhaps. But I still think it was worth coming out here. This half-bloomed old cherry blossom tree along the path leading from a red-light district reminds me of *A Lovers’ Suicide under the Cherry Blossoms*.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a kabuki play.”

In kabuki theater—as well as ningyo-joruri puppet shows and ballads—there was a genre that focused on tragic love that ended in double suicides. The puppeteer Chikamatsu Monzaemon was well known for his work in this genre. These stories often featured a couple whose love couldn’t be realized due to circumstances, so they committed suicide to at least depart the world together. The sad beauty of love that could not bear fruit captivated commoners, and the genre had remained massively popular since the Genroku era (1688-1704 AD). *A Lovers’ Suicide under the Cherry Blossoms* was one such story.

In *A Lovers’ Suicide under the Cherry Blossoms*, the young owner of a cloth store finds love at first sight with an oiran courtesan, and the two vow to be together. He saves money to buy her out of debt and marry her, but a fire breaks out in his store, causing him to lose everything. Without money, she can’t be his. Even so, the two don’t give up on their love. But eventually, another man comes along wishing to buy her out of servitude and marry her instead. The red-light district, heartless as it is, cares not for the oiran’s love and sells her to the man. With her wedding date set, the oiran tells her lover to wait for her under the old cherry blossom tree so they can run away together. She slips away on her last night and finds her lover waiting for her, but she is followed. Knowing there’s no escape, the two slit their throats with the ceremonial dagger given to the oiran for her wedding. As they await death, they lie atop one another, hoping to at least be together in the next world.

“I see. I can see how you’d be reminded of that,” Jinya said. Between the proximity of this cherry blossom tree to Yoshiwara and the eerie rumor surrounding it, he wouldn’t be surprised if he were told the kabuki play was actually based on this tree. It just fit that perfectly.

Jokingly, Ofuu cheerfully said, “Say, what if the demon woman you’re after is actually an oiran who failed to die in her lovers’ suicide? Wouldn’t that be quite

the twist?”

“That it would be.”

Such a thing wouldn't be out of the question. People who became demons due to strong emotions were as common as they came. In fact, he seemed to recall a case of *someone* becoming a demon after experiencing a love that couldn't bear fruit and failing to die with their lover. It wouldn't be strange for such an event to happen again.

Memories of bygone days flit through his mind. Pretending not to notice them, he gently closed his eyes.

Yoshiwara was a red-light district officially authorized by the Tokugawa shogunate. It was founded in year three of the Genna era (1617 AD) after a red-light district was approved for Fukiyachou, Nihonbashi.

Since its early days, Edo had always had far fewer women than men. Feudal lords were required to change residence between Edo, the capital, and their domains every year, and the retainers accompanying them to Edo often left their wives and children behind. Moreover, many young, single merchants and commoners—all men—came in hopes of making a name for themselves as well. The shogunate, their retainers, and even the common laborers all needed an outlet for their sexual urges. Hence, they willingly allowed a red-light district to be founded. Ever after the Great Fire of Meireki burned down Nihonbashi, the Yoshiwara red-light district continued to operate after moving to Asakusa.

It should be noted that the world of Yoshiwara was not as pristine as it appeared on the surface. Women were sold into a form of slavery, shackled by debts. Many low-ranking prostitutes were treated terribly. And yet, Yoshiwara remained the idealized subject of many an ukiyo-e painting and rakugo play, of epics played on the shamisen and of dramas told through ningyo-joruri puppet plays—some of which would be shared for generations to come. Men visited the dazzling quarters of Yoshiwara and saw a world of dreams, knowing full well it was built atop a lie.

Of course, for some it could never be a world of dreams.

For instance, the lowly streetwalker. To be a woman of Yoshiwara, one needed looks and youth. Of course, there were low-ranking prostitutes in Yoshiwara with little beauty, but those with even less to speak of could be found on the streets in droves. Streetwalking was the work of those who found themselves in their thirties with no family and no means to eke out a living. They were looked down on as the lowest of all prostitutes. Their worth was considered so low that they were known by a second name: twenty-four mon. This was because a night with them would cost roughly just that—twenty-four mon. Sleeping with two men was just enough for them to afford three bowls of soba. If the prostitutes of Yoshiwara were trapped within a dream, the streetwalkers were the ones who fell through the cracks of said dream...

Jinya didn't know if this situation was wrong or not, and it wasn't his place to say anything about it, either. He did away with his needless sentimentalism and continued his night trek in Asakusa. Upon reaching his destination, he looked up and saw fleeting light pink petals floating against the darkness.

"A demon under the cherry blossoms, huh..." In the dead of night on a path lit by a hazy spring moon, he stood under a modest, old cherry blossom tree in bloom and murmured to himself. The dazzling lights of Yoshiwara didn't reach these streets, and with the rumors of a demon woman abounding, none would dare approach this old cherry blossom tree and its humble, pale flowers.

"Oh, Ronin! You came."

None, that is, save for one demon woman, a Yasha guardian, and a stranger even the Yasha guardian couldn't quite figure out—the woman who would not reveal her name, simply asking to be called "Streetwalker." Under the faint light of a hazy moon, her skin glowed even paler than it already was.

"You look like a ghost."

"Oh my. That's quite rude to say."

"Was there any point in me not saying it? You'd read my mind regardless."

"That's true. You're just that easy to read." She giggled. Despite being a streetwalker, she didn't seem a tragic figure at all. If anything, she seemed somehow above it all. Truly, a strange woman.

“...What’s with this ‘Ronin’ nonsense?”

“Well, I figured since I’m just ‘Streetwalker,’ you could be ‘Ronin’. It’s not like we need anything beyond that, wouldn’t you agree?”

Slapdash titles would suffice for two people who would never get any more familiar than this. Jinya had no complaints. In fact, that was just how he liked it.

“Best of luck then, Ronin. Bring an end to this demon-under-the-cherry-blossoms nonsense for me.” The streetwalker left with a lazy wave goodbye.

Jinya made no effort to stop her. He had no interest in her, and the coming demon demanded his attention.

He didn’t know how much time passed, but eventually a chilly wind blew by. A cloud rolled over to cover the hazy moon, and some petals scattered, fluttering as they fell.

Then, it happened. Jinya was slumped against the tree when a woman appeared before him.

To say her clothes were shabby would be an understatement; she might as well have been wearing a rag. Her body was skin and bone, and in her hand was a knife crusted with blood. The faint smell present was likely alcohol. Her hair was unruly, long, and dry, missing in patches on one side. Her hideously festered face had no nose and was speckled with reddish-brown flecks.

“Oh, Samurai-sama...please...won’t you buy me...?” The woman spoke while pointing the knife at him. Her hand and voice trembled, but he had the feeling she did not intend to leave him alone.

There was no doubt this was the rumored demon under the cherry blossoms, but her eyes were both dark brown. She was no demon, just a normal person. A murderer perhaps, but a human one.

“I’ll have to decline,” Jinya replied.

“Buy...me...”

“Are you aware they call you the demon under the cherry blossoms?”

“Please...” The woman didn’t seem to understand his words. A teardrop ran down her festering skin. He hadn’t even noticed when she began crying. “It

hurts, it hurts... Please, buy me..."

"I said no."

Those words must have been the trigger that set her off. As soon as he said no, she began to change drastically.

"Ahh, ahhhhhh!" She was unmistakably human up until then. Her eyes were dark brown, and there was nothing particularly wrong with her. But now her eyes were red—she had become a demon. "Damn it, damn it! Why, why, why?!"

She charged forward, but even as a demon she was far slower than the average human. Without drawing his blade, he moved to her side and prodded her with his sheath.

That was all it took. He put little strength behind the blow, yet she crumbled. Having only recently become a demon, the woman had no demon ability to speak of. What's more, she was terribly weak.

"What are you?"

"It hurts, it hurts... I'll kill you, damn it... Ah..." The woman continued to cry as she frantically waved her knife.

She was no threat to him. He could evade her for as long as he wanted without breaking a sweat, but she was unmistakably the demon of rumor. Left to her devices, she would eventually kill someone again, so he had to finish her off.

"...My name is Jinya. Won't you tell me your name?" he asked. If he were to take her life, the least he could do was bear its weight. Asking for the name of those he killed was something of a ritual of his.

But the woman gave him no name. "It hurts... Damn it, I'll show you..."

Come to think of it, not much of what he'd said seemed to reach her. She must have broken long ago, likely far before she became known as the demon under the cherry blossoms.

"A shame." Jinya slowly drew Yarai. He took a stance with the unadorned sword, and the demon woman charged toward him without a care.

He pitied her, but he had no intention of buying her services or letting her roam free. It was a shame he couldn't learn her name, but that was ultimately something he did to appease himself—he would not hold back. Part of him did wonder, however: Would he not be punished one day for killing others for such personal gain?

As though to shake off the bad thoughts, he moved his sword to the side and took a big step forward with his left foot. With that momentum, he swept his blade horizontally.

There was no resistance.

The faint smell of alcohol was replaced with the stench of blood. The demon that had killed many men was herself easily slain and rendered a corpse beneath the cherry blossoms.

And so, to no fanfare, the demon under the cherry blossoms met its end.

The glamorous oiran courtesans of the Yoshiwara red-light district captivated the hearts of many Edo men. However, not everyone could be an oiran and hope to have their debts paid off by a feudal lord or wealthy merchant. The majority of prostitutes were middle-or low-ranking and had to work like a mule just to earn their meager meals. They were subject to corporal punishment at their establishments and had to pay out of pocket to dress up so they could entice clients, further adding to their debts. Even so, they never tried to run, for they knew there was no place they could run to. Yoshiwara was a dazzling lie, one that fell apart if looked at too closely. Many of the prostitutes trapped within the dream world of Yoshiwara died, unable to bear its hardships.

The most feared hardship of all, however, was a disease known as syphilis.

They called catching syphilis being “sent to the coop.” When birds molted, they holed up in their coop and, when the season came, shed their feathers. Prostitutes with syphilis were shut in their rooms while their hair fell out, just like molting birds—hence, the name.

In Yoshiwara, a prostitute who had survived being sent to the coop was considered a cut above the rest. Surviving syphilis meant more natural

miscarriages and stillbirths would occur. This was desirable, as pregnancy made one a disgrace of a prostitute, so a prostitute who couldn't conceive fetched a higher price.

Still, the prostitutes feared syphilis as it had no known remedy. Higher-earning prostitutes—such as oiran courtesans—could go on a vacation to receive medical treatment, but low-ranking prostitutes had no such luxury. Even if they once fetched a good price, they were often left neglected if they contracted syphilis. They'd eventually be left bedridden as the disease progressed. Red rashes would form as their skin grew inflamed, and an unimaginable pain assailed them. Extremities such as the nose and genitals rotted off, and organs failed before, at last, the mind deteriorated and they passed away, not understanding a thing.

“Honestly, you'd be better off dying quickly. Most are driven out of Yoshiwara before they reach that point. Not many takers for a girl with a nose rotted away by syphilis, you know?”

Under the cherry blossom tree, illuminated by a hazy spring moon, the streetwalker spoke with a far-off look in her eyes. It was the night after Jinya had killed the demon, and she was here to pay him for his work.

The bag she gave him had only twenty-four mon in it, the going price for a single night with a streetwalker. Jinya insisted it would be enough, but she was having none of it and offered to tell him what she knew as well.

She told him of Yoshiwara's hidden side, of syphilis, and of what happened to prostitutes who were chased out of Yoshiwara. She told him everything she knew of the world behind the dazzling dream men saw.

“Some who find themselves forced to work as streetwalkers can go home to their families, but most die out in the elements somewhere. You've seen them, yes?”

“...I have.”

It wasn't uncommon to spot a prostitute lying dead on the roadside. Despite that, men still continued to see a dream in the world Yoshiwara provided. Perhaps it was a dream precisely because it was so divorced from reality.

“It seems one was unlucky enough to survive syphilis,” the streetwalker said. The demon under the cherry blossoms was a shunned prostitute turned demon. She had been trapped in Yoshiwara as an outlet for men’s desire, then forced out upon catching syphilis. Despite having freedom, she could not choose her means to live, so she became a streetwalker. Even after her mind was gone, she remembered selling her body as the only way she could survive, but none would take her.

“She was trapped in a dream and sold for a dream. After getting sick and being discarded, she became a demon and killed men, all while still being tormented by that same dream. Just horrible, isn’t it?” the streetwalker said.

Even while in horrible pain and without her former beauty, the woman still pleaded for someone to buy her services so she could live. Yet all the men saw her horrible appearance and fled in terror, even though they were the very ones who brought this all upon her. And so, she came to kill all those who refused her. She couldn’t forgive men for being so selfish. Broken, she wandered the night and eventually became a local rumor.

That was the true identity of the demon under the cherry blossoms. A pitiful, nameless prostitute.

“Did you come to me because you pitied her?” Jinya asked.

“Call it sympathy. Who knows, I could very well end up like her one day. Once I thought of it like that, I just couldn’t leave her be.”

There was nothing that could have been done to help the woman, but the streetwalker wanted to see her be allowed to move on from this world at least. As a fellow woman, as a fellow prostitute who fell through the cracks of Yoshiwara’s dream, she wished for the nameless woman to be freed from the dream that still tormented her.

“Thank you, Ronin. I’m sorry for the displeasure I caused you.”

Jinya’s expression had remained flat throughout; he didn’t show any emotion. But killing that pitiful woman did leave him with regrets. The streetwalker somehow picked up on his feelings, proving herself to be as astute as ever.

“Incidentally, if I ever become some demon stalking the cherry blossoms,

would you be so kind as to strike me down? It'd have to be for free, of course."

"I'm afraid I'm not keen on working for free."

"Aw, that's too bad." She correctly picked up on what he'd left unsaid, however: *I'm not keen on working for free, so don't go doing anything I'd need to kill you for.* Amused by how he was too shy to simply say that, she smiled wryly. She took one last, listless glance at the cherry blossoms, then left, saying, "Goodbye then."

Petals scattered as though dancing with the passing spring breeze, and her pale skin glowed under the hazy moon. Into the darkness of night, she melted away. Perhaps there was something elegant to be found in it all.

What a strange woman... Now alone, Jinya gazed at the cherry blossom tree. A light pink petal gracefully fell in the darkness. Lost in its beauty, he thought back to Ofuu's story of a lovers' suicide, in which an oiran courtesan who'd fled the red-light district and her lover died together under the cherry blossom tree so they could be together in the world beyond.

He paused there, a question having formed. Could the demon woman have been waiting for someone here? Perhaps she was waiting for a certain someone to turn up and save her, like the oiran's lover had tried doing. But no savior came for her, so she turned to killing...

He pushed the idea from his mind and sighed. *What's it matter now?* he thought. It was empty conjecture at this point. He didn't know the truth, nor did he have any way of knowing it. Even if he were somehow right, knowing that would only make him remember the demon woman with even greater pity for ages to come. There was no point in entertaining the thought further.

Jinya turned away from the cherry blossom tree and began to walk.

Gracefully, the petal touched the ground. By the time spring was over, both the petal and the demon's unknowable sentiments would have faded and become one with the earth.

Missing Piece

1

IT WAS NOW summer in year seven of the Kaei era (1854 AD).

When discussing what makes Edo summers special, one must consider Sensou Temple's shiman-rokusen-nichi.

In Buddhism, some days are considered special, such as the Bodhisattva Kannon's auspicious day, occurring on the eighteenth of every month. There have also been other official days of virtue observed since the Muromachi Period (1336-1573 AD). Praying at a temple on one of these days grants the temple-goer greater blessings than on other days. For example, praying on the 10th of July is said to grant the equivalent of a thousand days' worth of visits, the largest blessing. For this reason, the 10th of July is called sennichi-mairi, or "one thousand visits." At Sensou Temple, however, that same day is instead called shiman-rokusen-nichi, meaning 46,000 days, as it is considered to be worth 46,000 days of visits in blessings.

As one might imagine, many commoners wanted to be among the first to pray at the temple on shiman-rokusen-nichi, so crowds would start forming the day before. To take advantage of the large influx of worshippers, many places decided to host markets and festivals. Even Sensou Temple itself began holding the Lantern Plant Market so worshippers could fully enjoy a variety of shops lining the path up to the main temple.

"...And that's about it. Sounds pretty cool, right? Why don't we go see the Lantern Plant Market for ourselves tomorrow??"

It was a sweltering summer day when Zenji burst into Kihee and started excitedly yapping about the Lantern Plant Market. Being born and raised in Edo, he had the energetic, willful nature so often attributed to its people.

"Oh, it's that time of the year already, eh?" said the restaurant owner with some enthusiasm. It was lunchtime, so the restaurant had a fair number of customers. At least, it did if you considered four customers—Jinya, Natsu, Zenji,

and Naotsugu, who was now a regular—to be a fair number. In all honesty, it was just the regulars present, so business wasn't exactly booming.

Everyone stared half-stunned at Zenji, who had entered the restaurant like a living storm. Zenji, on the other hand, seemed oddly satisfied, having said all he wanted.

“Don't you have work?” Natsu ventured.

“Right now? I told everyone I'm taking a lunch break. If you mean tomorrow, I plan to ask Jyuuzou-sama for the day off.”

“I can't believe you...” She gave him an icy, exasperated look, but he just beamed like he was certain everything would be fine.

He acted rather thoughtlessly at times, but Zenji was actually an employee at Sugaya, and was expected to be its manager one day. Yet here he was, hoping to get out of work to go have fun. One could only imagine the headaches Jyuuzou got.

“Aw, don't say that, Miss Natsu. It's only human to want to let loose a little when there's a big event,” he said.

“It'd certainly be a waste not to go,” Ofuu chimed in.

“Exactly! You get it, Ofuu!” Motivated by Ofuu's words of agreement, he turned to Naotsugu, who was casually sipping tea after his meal. “Naotsugu, don't you want to take a breather too?”

Natsu cut in, saying, “Hey, don't you think you're being a little overfamiliar with Miura-sama?”

“No, no, Naotsugu and I are chums! We don't need formalities between us,” Zenji claimed, to which Naotsugu nodded in agreement. “So, how about it?”

Naotsugu lowered his head apologetically. “Sadly, I have to work at the castle tomorrow.”

“Ah, I see... That's too bad.”

Naotsugu was a secretary who handled public documents for the shogunate. He didn't have much flexibility in his schedule.

Zenji didn't push Naotsugu further. Instead, he set his sights on Jinya. Naotsugu's inflexibility was understandable as he was a samurai, but Jinya was a ronin with irregular work. As long as he didn't have any ongoing demon-hunting requests, he should have nothing to do—in other words, he had no grounds to refuse. Zenji leaned far forward and asked, "What about you, Jinya? You're free, right? You'll come, riiight?!"

"I respectfully decline."

"At least take some time to consider it, will ya..."

Jinya felt a little bad to see Zenji so let down, but he had to decline regardless. Jinya couldn't allow himself to enjoy life—not completely, at least. He had eased up on how rigid he used to be, proof being that he would occasionally drink and indulge in mochi, but he was hesitant about overdoing it by partaking in grand festivities. The image of Shirayuki with her head torn off was still seared vividly into his mind. He could not allow himself to forget that sight and indulge in amusements.

"You should give it a chance, Jinya-kun," Ofuu said. She smiled gently, as though she'd picked up on something. "It's good to relax every now and then. You have a long way ahead of you, you know?"

That he did. A demon's life span was long. The time he'd spend going to a festival would only amount to a passing moment in the grand scheme of things. So how was it any different than having a drink or eating some mochi? They were all momentary indulgences, anyway. It wouldn't change much. Ofuu's casual words hid much-needed, caring advice.

"I guess I'll go," Natsu said. "If you wind up coming too, Jinya, I'll treat you to some isobe mochi."

"Why isobe mochi?" Zenji asked.

"No particular reason." She turned her head away from him while trying to suppress a smile.

Come to think of it, Jinya had only told Natsu about the fact that he liked isobe mochi; everyone else looked clueless.

"Why not go, Jin-dono? They really seem to want you to," Naotsugu said. He

spoke a little less stiffly with Jinya, perhaps because they appeared close in age. The over-serious man had a rare smile on his face. “I may not be able to go, but please, do enjoy yourself in my stead.”

Before Jinya knew it, all eyes were on him. He didn’t feel put on the spot, however. He could feel their kindness, but his answer wouldn’t change no matter what they said. “Thank you for inviting me, but unfortunately I already have plans tomorrow.”

He gripped the sword at his waist slightly, and Natsu frowned. She asked, “More demon hunting?”

He nodded. It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t wholly truthful either. The work was to take place at night, so he actually had time to visit the festival during the day, but he just couldn’t bring himself to.

“Well, there’s no helping that,” Zenji said. “What about you, Ofuu? Want to come?”

“Well...” She hesitated. She seemed worried whether the restaurant would be all right without her.

The restaurant owner smiled cheerfully and said, “Don’t worry, go on ahead and enjoy yourself.”

“But what about the restaurant?”

“It’ll be fine. Not like customers come by, anyway. I’ll manage on my own.”

The two went back and forth for a while, him continuing to insist she go enjoy herself, and eventually she conceded. “A chance like this only comes around every so often,” the restaurant owner said. “Go spread your wings a little.”

“...All right. Zenji-san, I think I’d like to join you after all.”

“All right, woo-hoo! Sorry, Jinya, Naotsugu. This man’s got these ladies all to himself tomorrow!”

In the end, only Zenji, Natsu, and Ofuu were to go to the Lantern Plant Market. The other men looked on with lukewarm expressions, unsure of how to react to the man’s bragging.

“And in the end, he couldn’t even get the day off.”

“Oh dear...”

On the day of the Lantern Plant Market, only two girls stood before Kaminarimon Gate, the imposing entrance to Sensou Temple’s grounds. Zenji was stuck working at Sugaya. His request for a day off had been shot down by Jyuuzou, who reminded Zenji it was simply the merchant's way to work while others played. Natsu had seen this all coming from afar, of course.

“You should’ve seen the look on his face, though. I genuinely thought he was going to cry.”

“Aha ha...” Ofuu smiled wryly, easily envisioning Zenji in the dumps. “So, what’s the plan then?”

“Well, we’re here, so we might as well have a look around.”

“I agree. Just us two girls.”

“Yeah! Who needs those dumb guys anyway?”

The two covered their mouths and laughed. They’d gone out for a bit of fun before the festival, just the two of them. This turn of events wasn’t the plan, but it was welcome regardless.

“Shall we then?”

“Let’s.”

Both sides of the approach stretching from Kaminarimon Gate to Houzoumon Gate were lined with stalls selling trinkets and treats. Colloquially, this was called the Nakamise shopping strip. Even under the full force of the harsh summer sun, it was so jammed with people it was hard to walk. The two let the festival mood take over and window-shopped to their heart's content, occasionally buying something to snack on.

“It’s so crowded,” Natsu commented.

“It really is, hee hee! You know, it kind of feels like we’re doing something naughty,” Ofuu said. In their hands were the manju sweets they had just bought. Eating while walking about was generally considered improper, yet it was also one of the charms of festivals.

“Why? We’re not doing anything wrong. Everyone does this at festivals.”

They took a bite of their snacks and shared a smile. Afterward, they allowed the throng of people to sweep them along. They saw stalls selling paper lanterns and combs and dumplings and so much more. At last, they reached a fine temple coated in vermilion lacquer—Sensou Temple itself.

Sensou Temple was also known by its full name, Kinryuzan Sensou Temple, and an alternate name, Sensou Kannon. The temple’s history stretched back a long way, beginning in Empress Suiko’s time (628 AD) when three brothers reeled in a statue of Kannon while out fishing and enshrined it in a thatched roof temple. These days, it was known as the official temple of the Tokugawa clan and the busiest place in the entire eastern side of the country during festivals.

“It’s the height of summer, huh...” Natsu murmured as she gazed at the plethora of red lantern plants. Farther within the temple grounds, she could see the many stalls selling the hexagonal, reddish-orange lantern plants the festival took its name from. At this point in the season, they had the shape of a fruit instead of a flower. In this way, they resembled a paper lantern and were more recognizable than when in flower form. They were a staple item in the summer and the sight of them swaying in the occasional cool breeze was lovely.

“Why are lantern plants called houzuki anyway?” Natsu curiously asked, thinking Ofuu, with her extensive flower knowledge, might know something interesting.

“Nobody really knows why, but there are many theories. Some say it’s because the fruit inside is red, like blushing cheeks (houzuki), and others say it might be derived from the word for ‘on fire’ (hohotsuki), given its appearance.”

“Huh. You don’t say.”

“Depending on how you write it, houzuki can even be read as ‘demon lantern.’ Who knows, maybe demons use it at night.”

“Ugh, please. Now I don’t feel like buying one.” Natsu didn’t have the best memories of demons. The incident with that festering demon was perhaps not *all* that bad, since she was able to acknowledge who she really was because of it, but remembering the incident soured her mood.

“Do you not like demons?” Ofuu asked.

“Does anybody?” Natsu countered.

“Hee hee, fair point.” Demons and humans could never get along—that went without saying. Ofuu smiled joyfully, her inner thoughts unreadable.

“I might hate them a little more than others, though, since I’ve been attacked by demons twice before,” Natsu said. “Honestly, I’m pretty sure I’d be dead by now if it weren’t for him.”

“You mean Jinya?”

“Yeah. About four years ago, he guarded me for two nights. I was such a child then; I thought he looked like one of those swordmasters in those tall tales.”

“Ah, like Watanabe-no-Tsuna?”

“Exactly like Watanabe-no-Tsuna. I couldn’t believe someone could actually cut off a demon’s arm like it was nothing, but Jinya actually did it.”

She remembered how he so boldly appeared and sarcastically said, “*Now then, how much would you like to buy my services for?*” before going on to take on the demon. He seemed like something straight out of a kabuki play. She thought he was heroic, although her childishness kept her from expressing it.

“You really like him, huh?” Ofuu said, not a hint of teasing in her voice.

“...Not like *that*, though.” Natsu blushed slightly at the Ofuu’s serious tone. She then paused, however, and slowly averted her gaze. “It really isn’t. I used to think he was some sort of hero, some sort of master swordsman who could kill demons in one strike. I *used* to...”

Her eyes were on the lantern plants. Perhaps because of her low spirits, the red bulbs seemed helpless as they dangled in the breeze, overlapping with the lanterns. “He once told me he doesn’t really know why he does what he does or what end it all serves.” She recounted the words that caused her image of him to start changing. “At the time, I had thought that was just something some fairy-tale-esque hero like him would say... But he looked so fragile then, nothing like the sword master image I had of him.” Someone she saw as larger than life suddenly looked so terribly small. And yet she didn’t feel pity but the opposite.

“But that made me happy.”

“Happy?”

“Yeah. I saw a bit of myself in him. I used to hate how I’d shut away the things about myself that I didn’t want to acknowledge, yet still demand love from others. Seeing he had his own demons made me feel...relieved.” The feelings she had couldn’t possibly be of love. It was only the joy at being able to bask in mutual pity. The comfort she felt with him was only that of them licking one another’s wounds. To call such a thing love would be wrong. “Saying I like him like *that* would be rude to all the couples of the world... Yeah. Sorry, that took a weird direction.”

“No, it’s fine. I do agree though. You two are similar.”

“How so?”

“You both try so hard to not acknowledge your own feelings.” Ofuu gently smiled. For the first time, Natsu saw in her a mother’s tenderness. Ofuu shouldn’t be much older than her, yet she somehow seemed so much more mature.

Natsu wondered just how Ofuu herself felt about Jinya. Curious, she hesitantly began to ask. “Hey, Ofuu-san...” However, she was interrupted by another voice.

“Hey, missy, why don’tcha come take a look-see at my wares?”

Natsu jumped, then quickly turned toward the voice. Right beside a line of hung lantern plants was a man sitting cross-legged on a rug, beckoning her over. Before him were some small articles. A peddler, Natsu figured, taking advantage of the Lantern Plant Market to tout his wares. He wore a voluminous silk robe with long, hanging sleeves that was common casual wear for the upper classes, though he didn’t seem like the sort to hail from a samurai family. His status aside, it was a strange choice of clothes to hawk wares in. All he needed was a tall black hat and slightly more subdued colors and you’d think he was a Shinto priest.

“Oh, Akitsu-san.”

“Heya, Ofuu-chan.”

“What are you up to today?”

“Just what it looks like: peddlin’. Feel free to buy somethin’ if ya like.”

He took a casual tone with Ofuu, like one might with a child. A bit taken aback, Natsu discreetly whispered to Ofuu, “Psst, who the heck is this?”

“A customer who's been taking deliveries from us since around last year. He's from Kyoto.”

“You don't say...” Natsu faintly recalled the restaurant owner mentioning something along those lines before. She looked at the man again and saw a broad smile plastered on his face. She just couldn't bring herself to trust him, no matter how rude it made her seem.

“The name's Akitsu Somegorou. Nice to meet ya, missy,” he said with his thick accent.

“...Hmph. That's quite the name you're *appropriating*.” She narrowed her eyes in an icy glare. Akitsu Somegorou was a well-known metalworker active around the Meiwa to Kansei eras (1750~1800 AD). He dealt in combs, sword parts, and other similar items, and his simple yet detailed relief-carving techniques were still popular to this day. Somegorou combs were a prized item that not even Sugaya saw often. Only an *utter fool* would think to use his name as their own. What was this man even thinking?

“Don't you go worryin' 'bout my name now. Come, take a gander at my wares.”

There were a vast variety of items laid out before the man: netsuke sculptures, hairpins, combs, hand mirrors, papier-mâché hariko dolls, smoking pipes—you name it, he had it. It was an eclectic assembly of both woodcrafts and metalwork, lined up with no rhyme or reason, as though they'd been haphazardly set out... The quality of the items, however, looked passable.

“Let's see now... I reckon a girl of your age might be interested in somethin' like...this.” He hovered over his wares before grabbing a pair of clam shells with pictures painted in lacquer on the inside.

“Are those awasegai shells?”

“Oh, I’m surprised you’re familiar with these.”

“I’m a daughter of a merchant, so I know a thing or two.” Sugaya dealt in small articles like combs and netsuke sculptures, as well as awasegai shells. Her knowledge of the crafts was limited, but she could tell these awasegai shells were of excellent quality. The identical spring landscapes depicted over their jet-black bases were vibrant. It was a wonder that such artistry was here with some street peddler. “It looks a bit old, but it’s well made.”

There was an old noble’s game from the Heian Period (794-1185 AD) called kaiawase that involved competing over the beauty or uniqueness of different shells’ color and shape. Sometimes players would also make poetry using the shell as a motif as part of the competition. From this game of kaiawase evolved another game called kaiooi, which used multiple split halves of whole clams that players had to try matching (similar to a modern game called Concentration).

The shells used in kaiooi were called awasegai shells. Around the start of the Edo period, it became common for awasegai shells to be decorated on the inside with lacquer or gold leaf. This elevated them from mere game pieces to something else entirely. As only pairs from the same clam could fit perfectly with one another, they became seen as a symbol of strong marital bonds. Court noble families and feudal lords’ families gifted them as part of bridal dowries, and even commoners occasionally gifted half a shell to their loved one when seeking a hand in marriage. The gift of a shell was essentially a message, a vow of love—*as these shells are to one another, you are the only one for me.*

Somegorou said, “A girl your age has gotta have a boy you’re keen on. Give this to him and you two’ll be a done deal, guaranteed.”

“What’re you talking about? I don’t have anyone like that...” Natsu quietly murmured. The man’s smile remained just as broad.

Ofuu grinned impishly. “Don’t listen to her. She does, but she’s just too shy to admit it.”

“Wha—Ofuu-san?!”

“Aha ha ha, ain’t that cute. In that case, hows ’bout buyin’ this one instead?” He grabbed a wooden netsuke sculpture of a chubby sparrow. “This here’s a

lucky sparrow netsuke—as cute as you, I reckon. Made it myself.”

A lucky sparrow was what a well-fattened sparrow, or a sparrow with fluffed plumage to ward off cold, was called. Its charm made it a popular design for netsuke sculptures.

“It *is* cute...” Natsu replied. “But I’ll pass, Somegorou.”

“Ouch. All right, quality aside, I do really think this is the perfect item for ya.” Seeing her confusion, he explained, “Okay, so in Qing, they believe sparrows become clams, yeah?”

“Huh? Really?”

“Well, now it’s just a superstition, but the idea of sparrows becomin’ clams is there. People probably saw sparrows leave in late autumn and made up a whole story about it.”

“Okay, and?”

“Well, uh... Seein’ as clam shells are still too much for ya, maybe you should get a sparrow instead.”

“Why, I oughta...” It sounded like he was teasing her for hemming and hawing over whether her feelings were love or not, exactly like a child might. She glared, but his fishy smile remained strong.

“No, no, I’m not pullin’ your leg. I really think a lucky sparrow, doin’ its best to bear the cold, is perfect for you.” He sighed with a warm look on his face.

“Hearts change, missy. It’d be good if your feelings could one day become a clam.”

May the feelings tucked under this lucky sparrow’s wings one day become a clam shell you can share with ease...

His words stunned her ever so slightly for a moment. The fact that she reacted at all irked her, as though she’d been defeated. With a vexed frown, she said, “...You’re completely off the mark, but I’ll buy your sparrow. It’s cute, I guess.”

“That’ll be ninety—no, eighty mon for you.”

“...I’ll pay, but that’s a little steep.”

“A man’s gotta make a livin’ somehow.”

While expensive, it was a price she was willing to pay. His words left her miffed, but they hadn’t been all that unpleasant either. With a pout on her lips, she doled out the exact amount in coin.

“A pleasure doin’ business with ya.”

“The same.”

The lucky sparrow netsuke sculpture fit snugly in her hand. She squeezed it, feeling its warm wood, and wondered to herself: When the season came, would her feelings change form as the sparrow did?

What am I even thinking, she thought, hanging her head with embarrassment. These unwanted, sentimental thoughts must surely be the fault of this obnoxious man.

“Hold on, missy. Take this too, as a gift.”

“Huh? Oh, no, you don’t have to do that.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine.”

He half forced her to take a metal hairpin off his hands. It was a simple but elegant piece modeled after a small cuckoo bird. She reluctantly accepted, then gawked at it. “Is this a *real* Somegorou hairpin?” She was surprised to see the man had an actual, genuine, Akitsu Somegorou craft. This wasn’t something you handed out as a freebie, to say the least.

“I got myself a few more, don’t worry. You might as well take that off my hands. I’ll just toss it away if you don’t.”

“You’ll *what*?”

“I’ll toss it away, I said.”

He was obviously lying. Somegorou works were popular and could fetch a hefty price practically anywhere. There had to be something severely wrong with him if he just threw it away.

Natsu was hesitant to take such an item for free. But the man just beamed and said, “Oh, but no returns, ya clear?”

It was hard to say no when he was being so insistent. “I’ll take it, but...you’re sure?”

“Yes, absolutely. I think that hairpin would be happy with you.”

The man spoke of the item as though it were alive. It was strange of him, but Natsu just figured he must simply respect items a lot. Her impression of him changed some, and she glanced down at the hairpin. It was a fine piece, detailed and elegant.

“And hows about you, Ofuu-chan? See somethin’ you like?” the man asked.

“I’ll pass, thank you.”

“Oh? Your purse strings are surprisingly tight, huh?” He made a show of being disappointed. Then they both giggled at his silliness.

Such a strange street peddler he was; Natsu couldn’t quite get a read on the man. Still, going with the flow and chatting with random stall owners and peddlers was very much in the spirit of a market. She was in a good mood, especially since she got a couple of nice items out of it.

“Thanks, Mister. Shall we be off, Ofuu-san?”

“Let’s. Take care then, Akitsu-san.”

“Will do. Go enjoy the festival to its fullest.”

And so, the two girls returned to looking around. The blue skies and piercing rays blinded their eyes, and in the scorching heat, the lantern plants swayed.

Asakusa was Edo’s busiest shopping district, as well as the location of the shogunate's largest rice storehouse, Asakusa Okura. This storehouse wasn’t some ordinary storage facility, however. The rice stored there was collected as tax from the citizens that was used to pay for the salaries of the shogunate’s retainers. Given its importance, many officials were given residences near and on the premises.

The part of town to the west of Asakusa Okura became known as Kuramae around the middle of the Edo period, and many rice dealers took up shop there. Jinya was in the area paying a midnight visit to a liquor store called Mizukiya,

only a short distance away from the rice dealers. It was a large store, with two whole storehouses in the back.

He entered one of the storehouses and slowly drew his blade. It was dusty inside, and spacious too, as the rice had been hauled out. There would be enough room to move about if needed.

He heard a groaning echo—a demon lurked inside.

“What is your name?” Jinya asked. He didn’t know what circumstances brought the demon into this world, but here it was, nonetheless. Pale skin and red eyes, a look of resentment—it had all the traits of a demon. It only stood at half Jinya’s height, however, and had the appearance of a young child.

“...Kikuo.”

Jinya committed the name to memory. He felt some pity for it, but nothing more. His blade would not falter simply because a demon happened to be a woman or a child.

With one stroke of the blade, it was done. A white vapor rose, and then nothing remained.

He felt a slight pang nagging at him but tried his best to ignore it.

“You’re a lifesaver! Finally, I can sleep in peace at night. Thank you so much!”

“Not at all.”

The owner of Mizukiya exaggerated Jinya’s deed, but the demon really had been of the weakest kind. If anything, being thanked so gratuitously made Jinya uncomfortable. The demon hadn’t done anything wrong in the first place, save for being in the storehouse. What kind of scum made their living killing such defenseless things? He didn’t let it show, but Jinya disparaged himself inwardly.

“Here, the payment as agreed upon.”

Jinya checked the contents of the cloth bundle he was handed. Inside was two ryo—as in 8000 mon! This was a *very* generous payment, so perhaps the large store was doing well. “Thank you.”

“Oh, how about taking one of our prized bottles as well? We’ve got some really nice product that hasn’t even hit the shelves yet.”

“No thank you. You’ve given me more than enough already.”

“If you’re sure.”

The man was being quite generous, but Jinya really couldn’t bring himself to take any more, so he politely refused.

“Farewell.”

“Thank you so much for your help! I’ll be counting on you if we ever have a repeat case!”

The client paid very well, yet for some reason Jinya couldn’t help but think he never wanted to work for him again.

“Ah, there you are, Ronin. Kept me waiting.”

He stepped out into a night lit by nothing more than the stars above. A woman greeted him. She was thin, dressed in a slovenly manner, and her skin was sickly pale. Her every movement carried a certain listless allure, and the smile she gave him was playful. She was the streetwalker he had become acquainted with not long ago.

“I’m glad to see you’re unharmed,” she said.

“Were you worried about me?”

“Of course. It’d haunt me if you died because of the information I gave you.”

Jinya made occasional use of the streetwalker’s ability to gather information. She had access to other streetwalkers and all the whispers they collectively heard from their clients, which was information Jinya couldn’t easily glean himself. As payment for this valuable service, he gave her one ryo.

“Are you sure? This isn’t exactly small change, you know?”

“It’s fine.”

“...That’s quite the look on your face. I take it you’re not just taking pity on a prostitute?” she said inquisitively.

The money he received for the job felt wrong to keep, so he had no regrets giving half of it away. As though picking up on that, she stashed the money without a further word of pushback. That was how he preferred it. Honestly, being thanked by her would only leave him at a loss for words. The streetwalker understood his inner workings well, perhaps due to her line of work. She was one of the very few who could read him.

“Something happened, I take it?”

“It’s nothing worth mentioning. I just killed something I’d rather not have, is all.”

“And you couldn’t bring yourself to spare them?”

He knit his brows and looked at her out of the corner of his eye. She wore a nasty smirk.

“Hee hee. You’re just sooo easy to understand...”

She seemed to see right through him, but then again, he didn’t mind. She was a strange, strange woman, but he could let his guard down around her, just like he could with Ofuu and the others.

“Why not a companion for the night to cheer up your spirits?” she offered.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.”

“Ah, what a shame. Perhaps next time then.” As listless as ever, she slowly whirled around in one slow, graceful move and made to leave. A few steps later, she stopped and, without turning back, said, “Oh, right. There’s been rumor of a man who hunts demons as of late. Not you, but an onmyouji¹ who uses familiar spirits to fight.”

“A diviner...”

“Apparently he uses a dog familiar and a bird familiar to fight. This info is all sourced from pillow talk, of course, so I can’t guarantee its validity.” So she said, but she wouldn’t have mentioned it if she thought it was some empty rumor. Perhaps picking up on the fact that Jinya was taking her information seriously, she happily smiled. “Until next time then, Ronin. And good luck with your new business rival.”

And so, she faded into the night.

A man who hunts demons... Jinya reflected on her words, then made his way home. The summer night was humid and clammy air clung unpleasantly to his skin.

The next day was July 10th. It was a virtuous day; however, Jinya was not heading to Sensou Temple but rather to his usual destination, Kihee. He had earned a fair amount of money the previous night but felt awful. He hoped that eating some soba would ease his spirits a bit. The moment he ducked under the entrance curtains, however, he was met with the worried shouts of Ofuu and the restaurant's owner.

"Oh, Jinya-kun!"

"Jinya-kun, help! Th-there's something wrong with Natsu-san!"

"What's the matter?" Jinya quickly rushed over.

Natsu seemed to be sitting down normally. The only thing different about her was the hairpin she wore. Wondering what they could be so worried about, he called out to her. "Natsu?"

Her gaze turned toward him, and now he saw something was off. Her eyes were unfocused, and her face was flushed as though feverish.

"What's wrong?" He reached out to touch her, and she extended a hand as well. He was confused as she grabbed his hand and stroked its surface with her thumb.

The restaurant owner and Ofuu went wide-eyed and their jaws fell. Jinya was just as surprised, but he was too stunned to react. He genuinely couldn't process just what had happened.

Taking advantage of him freezing up, Natsu snuggled up to him with a love-struck look. In a familiar yet foreign voice, she said, "Ah, sorely have I missed you, brother mine..."

At that, Jinya began to feel faint.

SUPPOSING, FOR AN INSTANT, that on that rainy night they had instead returned home. Could they have remained a family then? Would his father have taken an orphaned girl as his daughter still?

It was meaningless to think about; reaching for the past achieved nothing. But perhaps, just perhaps, there was a world where he never met the woman he loved and instead ended up with a second little sister. A part of him believed that, deep inside.

“At long last...”

And it was that part of him that uncharacteristically flustered Jinya now.

“Na...tsu?” he stammered. The warmth he felt against his chest sent a chill up his spine. He didn’t want this. He was an ungrateful son who ran away from home; he had no right to call himself Jyuuzou’s son. Natsu was the only child his father needed, so Jinya chose not to tell her anything, for both Natsu’s and Jyuuzou’s sake.

“Dear brother, late but now returned to me...”

So why did she call him her brother now? Had the last act of service he tried to do for his father been meaningless? Perhaps it was wrong of him to even try to be considerate. Perhaps a demon like him had no right to act human.

He tried to pull Natsu off him, but she resisted fiercely. In the end, she remained clinging to his arm.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he asked, trying to force things along since he couldn’t get her to detach from him. It felt strange to try discussing something so seriously with her latched onto him like a lover, and it showed. Ofuu and the restaurant owner looked uncomfortable, and Jinya himself was more stone-faced than usual.

“She put on a hairpin that she got yesterday and then suddenly went unresponsive,” Ofuu said.

“It seemed to glow for a bit, then she was gone,” the restaurant owner said.

“You came in not long after that, so we don’t know much more than you.”

An unfamiliar cuckoo bird hairpin was in Natsu’s hair, simple yet elegant. Jinya didn’t know much about accessories and only saw a normal hairpin, but if it had glowed momentarily then it could be cursed.

“Natsu, could you hand me that hairpin you’re wearing?”

“Of course.”

She readily handed the hairpin over even though he hadn’t actually expected her to. The hairpin was the most suspicious thing here, but even with it removed, Natsu’s state didn’t change. She remained just as feverish and dazed as before.

“Maybe we should break it?” the restaurant owner suggested.

“No, that’s a bad idea,” Jinya replied. If they broke the hairpin and Natsu went back to normal, all was well—but if they broke it and she didn’t revert, things could be dire. It was better to avoid doing anything drastic until they had more information.

“Brother...” Natsu hesitantly reached a hand out. He thought for a moment, then returned the hairpin. She stuck it back in her hair and smiled before wrapping her arms around his again.

“...Just what is going on?” the restaurant owner wondered out loud. Natsu’s state was clearly abnormal. She was all over Jinya and calling him her brother in a sweet, wheedling voice. It was relatively harmless but still very, very strange. “Say, maybe Natsu-chan has actually wanted to be fawned over by Jinya-kun this whole time.”

“Dad!”

“Whoa, I’m kidding, I’m kidding. There’s no need to make that face.”

Ofuu’s admonishment of her thick-headed father seemed a little more stern than usual, perhaps because she was worried for one of her few friends. She asked, “Any ideas, Jinya-kun?”

“Hmm...”

Perhaps the hairpin had influenced her mind somehow, or maybe she was

possessed. The former wouldn't explain why she was calling him 'brother,' however. It was possible she knew of Jinya's connection to Jyuuzou, of course, but without being able to ask her directly, there was no way of confirming that. If she were indeed possessed, then what could she be possessed by?

...One possibility came to mind, but he quickly ruled it out. Suzune wouldn't address him so familiarly anymore, not after what had happened.

Ultimately, he didn't have enough information to draw proper conclusions, which meant the first course of action needed to be learning more about the hairpin.

"Where did she get this hairpin?" he asked.

"Yesterday, at the Lantern Plant Market," Ofuu answered. "A man from Kyoto named Akitsu had a street display there."

"Akitsu? As in the guy we deliver to now and then?" the restaurant owner asked with a surprised look.

It was convenient that they already knew the man. They wouldn't have to take stabs in the dark if they could interrogate the culprit himself.

"Ofuu, can you bring me to this Akitsu?"

"O-of course."

Jinya rose from his seat but felt a tug on his arm. He looked down and saw Natsu smiling sweetly up at him. She got to her feet as well.

"I'm coming with you."

For some reason beyond him, he didn't have it in him to tell her no.

Within the packed grounds of Sensou Temple, there was a section where red lantern plants were being sold, swaying in the wind to and fro.

"He was around here yesterday."

Ofuu led the way to where Akitsu Somegorou had been, but it appeared he had already closed up shop for the day.

"Do you have any idea where else he might be?"

“I don’t... I’ve made deliveries to the inn he was at before, but I doubt he’s there anymore.”

According to Ofuu, Somegorou came all the way from Kyoto. He stayed at an inn at first, but inns weren’t meant for long stays. He’d been in Edo for some time now, so it was likely he found a more permanent place to stay.

“I see. So we have no leads then.”

“It would seem so... I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t think for a moment that we’d find him easily.” But he did hope they’d find him fast. Even now, Natsu clung to his side. The shrine grounds were packed with people, many of them lovers walking side by side, arm in arm. From the looks he received, he could tell those around him seemed to think he and Natsu were one of the many such couples, and that deeply troubled him. “Natsu, could you maybe let go?”

“No.”

“It’s kind of hard to walk, though.”

“No.”

He tried to convince her gently, but she curtly refused to let go. He could forcefully pull her off, but that would be a bit *too* much. In the end, he had no choice but to relent and move as a pair.

“Could aught compel me now to let you go, my brother, when we are but met again?” she said. She looked up at him with soft, innocent eyes. Her face was the same, but she acted like a completely different person. The fact that she called him her brother pained him as well, as he recalled those days now long in the past.

“U-umm... I think I’ll go ask around where Akitsu-san might be.”

Jinya wasn’t the only one feeling put off by what was going on, it seemed. Ofuu hurriedly made herself scarce, leaving Jinya to fend off Natsu.

Seeing this as an opportunity, Natsu snuggled against him, perhaps not satisfied with just holding his arm. Jinya felt many eyes in the crowded temple grounds looking their way. He sighed, then dragged her farther within the

grounds and behind a shrine building, where few people were.

She gave him a confused look right as he firmly said, “Look... I’m sorry, but I don’t have a single clue what you’ve been trying to do this whole time.”

“Huh? Um...”

“I don’t know why you're suddenly all over me, and I don’t know why you’re calling me your brother. I can’t make sense of a single thing you’re doing at all.” His words weren’t the well-considered attempt to probe for information he wished they were. He was simply airing his petty grievances.

“What reason needs a bird by its flower to stay? So I would by my brother’s side.” She took his words in stride and smiled sweetly, her face flushed and eyes unfocused as though seeing some dreamworld. “And, ah, I waited long for this, my wish to live in truth... Ah... I am in bliss.”

She seemed to be in bliss indeed, so much that he couldn’t bring himself to press her any further.

After meeting up with Ofuu, they visited the inn Somegorou had stayed at in hopes of finding a lead. They questioned employees at the inn and the neighboring stores, but, perhaps not unsurprisingly, they came away empty-handed. The sun was beginning to set, so the three of them returned to Kihee.

“What’s going on?”

Zenji showed up shortly after they came back to Kihee, worried since Natsu hadn’t returned home.

“Straight to the point, huh?” Jinya said.

“Yeah, well, something clearly happened here. Miss Natsu doesn’t seem to recognize me, is talking funny, and is acting with class for once. She’s practically a whole ‘nother person. So, what happened?” Zenji brusquely questioned. Even after returning to Kihee, Natsu had been clinging to Jinya’s side, something that irritated Zenji a bit.

“Pray, stop this! He is faultless here...” Natsu cooed while slumped against Jinya’s chest.

Her coquettish behavior flummoxed Zenji. She was like a little sister to him; seeing her fawn over a man like this bewildered him to no end. He was so flustered that he forgot to even be angry.

After being apprised of the situation, he let out a grand sigh. It was just Natsu's luck to be wrapped up in another supernatural incident like this. He crossed his arms with a frown and said, "So she's cursed or something, huh? Well, what can we do?" He was calmer now, perhaps because he understood there was no danger to her life.

"The one who sold her the hairpin is apparently named Akitsu Somegorou. Our first goal is to find him."

"Huh? Wait, what're you talking about?" Zenji said, giving Jinya a questioning look.

Jinya furrowed his brow and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Well...yeah. Akitsu Somegorou died long ago."

"What?"

"He was a craftsman who was around decades ago. He made combs, hairpins, and parts of swords. He's a pretty famous metalworker; not even our store gets his stuff in much."

Zenji was probably right about Akitsu Somegorou being dead, given that Zenji worked at Sugaya, which dealt in small trinkets. So just who was the man they were after then?

"Come to think of it, Natsu-san mentioned this hairpin was a Somegorou work," Ofuu said.

"You're kidding. Wait, maybe Somegorou has somehow come back from the dead as a demon?" Zenji suggested.

Jinya didn't think it was impossible, but the restaurant owner shot down the idea with conviction. "No, that can't be."

"What makes you so sure?" Zenji asked.

"I've seen him myself. He's a normal human, no doubt about it."

“If you say so, then it must be true,” Jinya said, backing him up.

“Huh? How can you be so sure, Jinya? You’ve never even met this guy we’re after.”

“I just am.” Jinya had a fair amount of confidence in the restaurant owner’s judgment since he had once figured out that Jinya was a demon with ease. “Which means the man we’re after is just using the name of Akitsu Somegorou for himself.”

“I’m not sure why anyone would want to use such a clearly fake name, but regardless, we still have no idea where he is,” Zenji said.

Jinya then remembered there was someone he knew with a good deal of information. It would be worth checking in with the streetwalker.

The moment he tried to stand up, however, he felt Natsu’s arm grip tightly around his own. She clung to him desperately, not letting him so much as stand.

“I’m sorry, but can you let go?” he asked.

“No,” she flatly replied, not even hiding her displeasure. “I’ll not release you, brother mine, not now when after so long a wait I’ve found you.”

He didn’t have a clue what she was going on about, but every time she called him her brother, distant memories flitted through his mind. His life in Kadono met a tragic end, but he still wouldn’t give those days up for the world. Seeing Natsu acting as though she were his little sister made his chest feel tight. He fought to look calm, hiding his internal conflict, and looked her in the eyes. “I have to go. Stay here for me.”

“No, bring me there with you.”

He patted her head thrice. Gradually, she loosened her grip, a pout still on her face.

“I’ll be back before you know it, promise.” Faintly, he recalled saying something similar whenever he left home for his demon-hunting duties. Back then, he’d always be the recipient of a similar sad, pouty look as well. Suzune never tried to force him to stay, though. Murky hatred stirred inside him.

He hated his nature. As a demon, he could not prevent himself from hating

Suzune, even now. Perhaps that was the real reason why he was bothered by Natsu calling him her brother: It reminded him of his true nature.

“Will you be a good girl and wait for me?” He didn’t let his feelings show. Over the years, he’d become better at hiding his thoughts. Whether that was a result of growing older or of abandoning his humanity, he did not know.

“...Very well.” Natsu softly smiled, then released her arm. As though to shake off the warmth that remained from where she held him, he turned his back to her.

“You’re oddly good at handling her. Have you done this before?” Zenji said, surprised that an unsociable man like Jinya could persuade Natsu so well.

Jinya didn’t answer his question, didn’t even look back. “Zenji, look after her while I’m away.”

“Huh? Wait, you’re not just shoving her onto me, are you?”

Jinya left the restaurant without another word. He felt reluctant to go but tried not to think of why.

It was evening as Jinya made for Asakusa. He was hoping to meet the streetwalker on a riverbank in the area, but he intuitively understood he was grasping at straws by this point. He continued along the path, warmed by the evening glow, as his mind wandered to thoughts of Natsu and Suzune. He quickly pushed those thoughts away, however, not wanting to bask in meaningless sentimentality. He wanted to become stronger and nothing else. He had a clear goal and an equally clear means to achieve it. Everything outside his goal was not worth thinking about. All needless thoughts needed to be discarded in pursuit of his goal.

Ever so slightly, he picked up his pace.

“Lovely sunset, ain’t it?” Suddenly, a man called out to him in a rather empty area.

Jinya stiffened at once. The man, wearing a voluminous silk robe, was only about two ken² away—no more than a dozen steps’ distance—yet Jinya hadn’t

noticed him there at all. Yes, Jinya had been deep in thought, but to not notice somebody this close was utterly careless of him.

“I’m gettin’ the feelin’ we’ll be graced with a lovely moon tonight. Sure puts me in the mood for a drink.”

“Do you have business with me?” Jinya asked, his gaze turning sharp with suspicion.

Rather than cower at Jinya’s gaze, the man plastered a smile on his face. “I’m sorry? I thought *you* were the one who had business with me.”

The unexpected reply put Jinya even more on guard. He felt a faint hostility underneath the man’s smile and instinctively put a hand on Yarai.

“I heard you’ve been lookin’ for me,” the man continued. Now it all made sense. Word that Jinya was searching for this man had gotten around, so he had searched for Jinya in turn. “I hadn’t a clue what a man nearly six shaku tall could possibly want with me...” The man’s arms hung limply at his sides, his jovial smile still intact. Jinya immediately popped his blade from its scabbard, feeling a soft bloodlust emanate from him. “But now I understand. A demon would have plenty of reason to seek me out.”

The air tensed as the man acknowledged Jinya’s true identity, yet the man showed no fear despite knowing he was before a demon. Seeing the man’s confidence, Jinya was reminded of the streetwalker’s words: *There’s been rumor of a man who hunts demons as of late. Not you, but a diviner who uses familiar spirits to fight.*

The man’s clothes were similar to those of a Shinto priest—he could easily pass for a diviner.

“Before we fight, tell me: What is your name?” Jinya asked, lowering his stance and narrowing his focus to the target in front of him, ready to move at any moment.

The man waved his arms casually, and black haze appeared at his feet. Gradually, the haze solidified and took the shape of three dogs.

“Me? I’m Akitsu,” the man said proudly. “Akitsu Somegorou the Third.”

There was no doubt in Jinya's mind—this man was a demon hunter.

3

"HOW ABOUT we begin, then?"

Before him, Jinya finally had Akitsu Somegorou, the man he had been searching for, but there was no time for talk. Somegorou's eyes held clear animosity toward him.

"Go, dog spirits!"

On that short order, the three black dogs sprang forth. Since he was a diviner, those must've been his familiar spirits.

Jinya knew better than to underestimate dogs. It was in a dog's nature to hunt in packs, and a large enough pack could easily threaten a man's life. These dog spirits didn't take the form of dogs just for show either; they moved as a group like real dogs might. One looped behind Jinya, another waited just outside striking distance, and yet another lunged from the front—a strong display of team coordination.

However, Jinya wasn't about to go down to the likes of some dogs—their speed and coordination were nothing to him. He stooped low and stepped forward off his right foot. He sliced

through—no, scattered—the approaching dog spirit with his widely arcing blade. With its head left in bits, it dissipated without any death throes.

"Oh, you ain't half-bad." Despite losing a familiar, Somegorou wore an amused smile.

Jinya wondered where the man's confidence was coming from, but not for long. The wisps of dark shadow that scattered off the dog spirit he killed coalesced into the dog spirit's body. Not ten seconds had passed before it was completely reformed. It lunged again at Jinya's throat—he didn't even have time to be surprised.

"But it'll take more than that to defeat my dog spirits, y'see," Somegorou said.

Jinya dodged out of the way of the lunging dog spirit, then sliced through it. The remaining two spirits bared their fangs. While he contended with them, the first regenerated yet again. This cycle continued for some time, and Jinya carefully observed everything throughout. He noted the dog spirits' speed, teamwork, and regenerative properties. Somegorou hadn't boasted for nothing. These dog spirits were troublesome opponents, especially with their regeneration. But maybe he could skip fighting them entirely and go directly for their master.

Invisibility. He erased his form using a power he'd once devoured and quietly closed the distance.

"Oh, is that your power?" With one glance, the man understood Jinya was using a higher demon's power, proof he was experienced in demon matters. The fact that he had gleaned such knowledge and lived to tell it was a testament to his strength. "Sorry, pal, but I ain't letting ya slip away that easily."

As if on cue, the dog spirits accurately attacked Jinya's location. They growled and aimed for his vitals with their claws and fangs. He parried them with his sword and backed away.

"Oh, you didn't know? Dogs have a mighty good set of ears and noses on them."

Invisibility was a power that hid one's figure and presence—but it could not hide the sound one made. Dogs were perceptive to sound, many times more so than humans. Jinya's ability to hide would be useless here.

He dropped the invisibility and fought the dog spirits head-to-head. He swung and cut through them repeatedly, only for them to regenerate every time—an exact repeat of the cycle from earlier. The situation was unfavorable; he would be slowly worn to death at this rate. He needed a way to overcome this deadlock.

"Aha ha. It's a shame your power was useless against me."

"Indeed. But I'm not out of options yet."

"Hm?"

For starters, he needed to close the distance. The husband's power proved of

no help here, so it was time to try the wife's instead.

Dart. He took a careless step forward, then in the next instant sped faster than the eye could see. He easily slid past the dog spirits and was now within reach of Somegorou.

"Huh?" Somegorou was left wide open, still processing what had happened.

Jinya still needed to question the man, so he couldn't kill him yet. But the man *had* tried to kill him, so he'd be justified to hurt him a bit. He planted both feet on the ground and forcibly killed his momentum, then further restrained himself by not turning his body as he struck the man in the chest with his fist instead of his sword.

"Wh-wha—" A look of surprise overcame Somegorou. There was no time to recall his dog spirits. He began moving to protect himself but was too late to stop the speeding fist from landing and sending him flying. He tumbled over the ground as he was sent flying back about three ken, all the while kicking up a cloud of dust. He wasn't dead, but he wouldn't be standing anytime soon either.

Jinya approached, hoping to restrain his opponent while he was down, but he froze before getting too close.

"Ouch, ooh..."

Jinya had held back, but his blow landed true. And yet, the man stood up, seemingly unaffected, only uttering a light complaint with a look of complete composure on his face. Jinya frowned. The man appeared human outwardly, but his durability was, without a doubt, inhuman.

However, Jinya wasn't the only one who saw something strange. Higher demons typically only had one power to their name, and yet Jinya had just used two. Somegorou gave Jinya a dubious look. "Hey now, why do you have two —*whoa?!?*"

Ignoring his question, Jinya swung. Despite being taken by surprise, Somegorou evaded him by a narrow margin. Jinya had accounted for this and continued to attack without letting up. He now knew how durable his opponent was; if he held back slightly, he could likely hit him with the back of his sword

and not kill him.

“W-wait, now I said wait!” the man said.

But who in their right mind would stop now with such an advantage? Jinya continued to swing—not aiming to hit, but to slowly lead his opponent into a corner with no escape. He swung again, and the move was evaded. A second swing and Somegorou dodged backwards. With a third swing, Jinya’s sword grazed Somegorou and made him stumble.

Jinya was sure the next strike would end things. He stepped forward and brought his blade up slightly, aiming at the shoulder. Although he was striking with the back of the blade, he still put decent strength into the blow. With the man off-balance, there would be no evading. The air whistled as the sword tore diagonally through it.

But Jinya’s sword slipped *through* the man with no resistance whatsoever.

“Sorry, but I’m not over there,” the man said with a wry laugh. The outline of his frame wavered like fog. “Have you never seen a mirage before?”

Jinya had struck at nothing more than an illusion. Finally understanding that, he tried to leap away but was struck from behind.

“Gah!”

He had been careless. The dog spirits surrounded him now, and this time, he was the one off-balance. He began to push himself up, but a dog spirit barreled into his abdomen. He tried to pivot off his leg, but claws gouged his thigh. He attempted to swing his sword, but one of the beasts’ fangs dug into his shoulder. Dull pain coursed through his body; the tides had shifted completely against him.

“I’m not...finished yet!” He slashed horizontally and killed one of the dog spirits, but the remaining two gave him no time to rest.

Somegorou didn’t miss the opening Jinya presented. “Sorry, but it’s over.”

A set of fangs sunk into Jinya’s neck, causing him to collapse backward, face toward the sky. Without relenting, the dogs continued to attack, tearing flesh off like wild beasts gorging on a dead cadaver.

“My dog spirits proved pretty strong, eh? ...Ah, right, I suppose ya can’t hear me anymore.”

Jinya had misread his opponent’s strength and was now paying the price. The man who lived only to seek strength now lay felled, and so easily. How pathetic.

“Farewell then,” Somegorou said, as his dog spirits became more sluggish in their attacks. Sure of his victory, he turned his back to Jinya. To the diviner, Jinya was just the latest of countless demons he’d slain. Turning his back wasn’t an act of baseless conceit but of well-earned confidence.

Hence, it came as a surprise to hear that Jinya could still speak.

“It’s...it’s as you say. Your dog spirits are strong.”

“...How are you still alive?” Somegorou turned around, then tensed up. An understandable reaction, given that the demon he’d taken for dead had stood up. What was more, his prized dog spirits were *gone*. His forced smile warped as panic crept in.

Jinya ignored the man’s reaction and calmly took stock of the situation. He was wounded but could still move. His left arm was serviceable.

“They’re incredible, really,” he said. “Your dog spirits, that is. They’re comparable to a higher demon.” These were no words of empty flattery. Somegorou’s familiars were genuinely far beyond the realm of man. But it was for that very reason Jinya could do *this*.

“Go, *dog spirits*.” As he held his left arm aloft, black shadows began to rise from the ground. The shadows gradually took the shape of three dogs.

“Now that’s just cheating...” Somegorou groaned. His familiars weren’t defeated—they were *stolen* from him. That knowledge wouldn’t do anything for him, however, as the three black hounds were already dashing toward him. His ability to manipulate his familiars had been good, but the same couldn’t be said for his physical prowess. With his hands full just dodging the coming attacks, he was easily backed into a corner. “Whoa, hey, hold on now!”

“No way.” Jinya took his time to close the distance. He didn’t need to make a big swing, just ensure his opponent had nowhere to run.

A dog spirit swiped at him and growled. Somegorou narrowly avoided the strike but lost his balance and fell to the ground. He was surrounded, with dogs ready to leap at his throat and a demon pointing his sword straight at him. There would be no escape; the stage was finally set.

“Let’s talk,” Jinya said. He still needed to resolve the problem with Natsu, one way or another.

“Huh? You ain’t killing me?” Somegorou said with disbelief.

“I have some answers I need from you. Talk and I’ll spare you.”

“And if I don’t spill the beans?”

“Then I’ll just devour you and take your memories.” *Assimilation* allowed Jinya to absorb memories, and while he’d rather not kill if he could, Natsu’s life was far more important to him than Somegorou’s.

“Hmph, is that so? All right, I’ll answer your questions. Not like I got a choice, seein’ how I’m backed into a corner here.”

“I wonder about that. I get the feeling you haven’t shown your full hand just yet.” Jinya didn’t think for a moment that the man was out of options. He had devoured the dog spirits for himself, but he still hadn’t dealt with Somegorou’s abnormal durability or his mirages. Moreover, the man still spoke with confidence. It was safe to assume he still had a move or two up his sleeves.

“Like you’re one to talk here,” Somegorou shot back. “You held back on me too, didn’t ya?”

Indeed, Jinya had held back on his blows. He hadn’t changed into his demon form either. Perhaps that was why Somegorou held back as well and allowed himself to be cornered—he understood Jinya wouldn’t kill him. He was an annoying opponent, to say the least.

“I’ll answer whatever questions ya got, but could you get rid of these things first? They’re not exactly a comfortin’ presence.” Somegorou’s body relaxed. He seemed to have no intention of running.

Jinya did as he was asked and called off the dog spirits.

Somegorou grinned broadly and laughed. “Aha ha ha! You actually did it?

Aren't you a little naive?"

"I didn't think you'd try and trick me."

"You guessed right, but you might not have been so lucky with someone else. Oh, hold those questions for a moment; I need to pick up my dog spirits. No need to be on guard or anything, I'm not a runner." Somegorou walked over to where Jinya had collapsed earlier and picked a few things off the ground. "Gotta give these things a proper send-off later."

"Are those...hariko?"

"You guessed it." In Somegorou's hands were a few small papier-mâché hariko dolls in the shape of dogs. Dogs bore multiple pups at once and were thought to have an easier time giving birth than other animals. They were also thought to ward off wicked spirits, so these dolls were given as protective charms to women before childbirth and to children to wish for good health.

"Are you familiar with tsukumogami, the artifact spirits?"

Jinya answered with silence.

Somegorou lovingly caressed the broken hariko dolls and let out a wry, exasperated chuckle. As though reciting something, he said, "When an object reaches a hundred years of age, it gains a soul and becomes a spirit. Emotions dwell within objects. They feel joy in being loved and sadness in being forgotten." His shoulders went slack. The smile he kept plastered on his face was gone, replaced by the loving look a father might show his child. "Emotions are power. Just as negative emotions can take form and become a demon, the emotions of *things* can take form as well."

So that was what the dog spirits were. Whether positive or negative, emotions had power. The earlier black dogs were the hariko dolls' souls given form.

"In other words, you can take the emotions in objects and turn them into spirits?" Jinya asked.

"That's right. I don't use familiar spirits like a diviner might but rather artifact spirits. An artifact spirit user, if ya will."

An artifact spirit user, he said. The world truly was filled with all sorts of

strange people. Putting aside the fact that he himself was a demon, Jinya murmured in awe. He said, "You mentioned you were 'the Third'. Do you hail from a line of exorcists?"

"Not by blood. Nagumo of the Demonic Sword and Kukami of the Magatama passed on techniques to me, but Akitsu is its own school." Somegorou tucked the broken dog hariko dolls away, and his plastered smile appeared once more. "The original Akitsu Somegorou used to be an ordinary craftsman. The thing was, he was just *too* good, y'see. *Everything* he made came to harbor a soul, and that's no exaggeration. Eventually, he created a way to change his crafts into artifact spirits he could control as he pleased. When he retired, his disciple inherited the Somegorou name, and later, so did I. My point bein', Akitsu Somegorou is the name of a craftsman, not a line of exorcists."

"I see. That makes sense," Jinya said. The man hunted demons yet didn't seem to mind talking to one now. Somegorou likely prized its identity as a craftsman before his identity as an exorcist; he wouldn't attack a demon that meant him no harm. He only attacked Jinya because he heard Jinya had been searching for him and presumed the worst.

"I ain't nothin' more than a craftsman who can hunt spirits if need be. Heh, we've gotten a bit off topic here, haven't we? Sorry, what's your name?"

"Jinya."

"Gotcha. So, what's it you been dyin' to ask me, Jinya?"

It had taken a bit of fuss, but they were finally getting to the matter at hand. Jinya sheathed his sword and asked, "Do you remember selling a hairpin to a girl yesterday?"

"A hairpin? Ahh... I didn't sell it, *per se*, but gave it away."

"Is that so? Well, the second the girl put it on she seemed to become an entirely different person. Would you mind explaining just what that hairpin is?" Jinya kept his expression flat, but he couldn't fully hide his surge of emotion as his eyes turned red. He glared, warning the man he would not permit a lie now, but Somegorou didn't seem worried.

"Hmm, really? It should just be an ordinary hairpin, though..." He had guts, to

be so carefree with a sword pointed straight at him. After some hemming and hawing, he looked at Jinya's chest and grinned broadly. "Oh, I know what's going on. I'll do somethin' about that girl for ya, all right? So go on ahead now and put that thing away before you poke an eye out."

"...Can I trust you?"

"Well, that's not for me to say. I could be lyin', I could be truthful. But we're not gettin' anywhere if ya don't trust me."

Jinya clicked his tongue in annoyance. He really did have no option but to put his faith in the man, but having that fact flaunted annoyed him. *What an infuriatingly cunning man*, he thought with a sigh.

4

AFTER THAT confrontation at dusk, Jinya traveled back to Kihee in Fukagawa. The sky had dimmed to a soft indigo blue. The cicadas, now distant, continued to cry as he walked.

Akitsu Somegorou the Third had partly accompanied Jinya on the return trip but had excused himself moments ago. Before parting, he told Jinya how to bring an end to Natsu's change. The method was something so simple Jinya doubted whether it would really work, but trusting the man was his only option. If it turned out Somegorou did dupe Jinya, Jinya could just find and kill him later.

Jinya found Natsu along the path back to Kihee, waiting by the roadside with the cuckoo bird hairpin in her hair. Her face in profile was full of sorrow. Hardly a trace of the old Natsu could be seen. He called out: "Natsu."

"My brother dear, you've come again..."

He was lucky it was summer, sultry as it was. If it had been a different season, she might've frozen to death outside.

"You waited for me?"

"Yes. Just as you had asked." She smiled, even though the truth was that she

didn't want him to leave. Her smile was just to reassure him she was okay.

"I'm sorry. I ran a little late." Was he apologizing for making her wait or for swearing promises so carelessly? He lowered his head without knowing which it was.

"I minded not, knowing you would return."

On a rainy night long ago, he vowed to remain the brother of a certain girl until the end, no matter what she ultimately became. But he'd broken that vow like it meant nothing. Natsu's trust in him hurt all the more because it was so genuine. Even so, his expression remained passive. When he was a child, he would cry after falling and scraping his knee, but now no tears would come even if his belly were torn open. He had not become tougher, just inured to pain. It seemed like one's sense of pain grew duller the longer one lived. Whether that was a good thing or not, he did not know.

He said, "Shall we walk?"

"By all means. Let me but stay by your side, the destination is to me the same."

They linked arms and walked into the twilight, huddled close like lovers one might read about in books. Natsu looked elated. He could feel the heat of her body through their linked arms; she was so warm, yet for some reason his heart felt cold.

It was nightfall now, and the streets of Fukagawa were cast in pale moonlight. Close to the well-maintained Kanda River was a grassy spot with a line of willow trees.

"These are snow willows," he said as he neared and softly touched one. "They bloom snow-like flowers in spring."

It was peaceful here—this would be a good spot for them to talk. Their pace naturally slowed.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"To be blunt, yes. It's...difficult to hear you call me your brother," he began. "I'm a failure of a brother, so hearing you call me by that title is, well... I

suppose it reminds me how pathetic I am.” A man who loathed his own sister had no right to be called anyone’s brother. Every time Natsu called him that, memories of the distant past flitted through his mind: places from his childhood and people he loved, all things he failed to protect because he was weak. That was why he was trying to become stronger. It was all he had to live for. “I’m no longer Jinta. I cannot be your brother, Natsu...nor Suzune’s.”

“No, you’re wrong.” Her words softly but firmly negated his. He raised his gaze to see her flushed, dreamy look gone and replaced by a look of cool clarity. “What reason needs a bird by its flower to stay? So I would by my brother’s side. Come what will, that bond holds unbreakable.”

She smiled, full of gentleness, and proclaimed siblings remained siblings eternally. But even now the hatred in his heart would not fade. He was too twisted to accept her genuine words in sincerity. Her wholesome smile only seemed to cast a painful, searing light on the ugliness he hid deep inside himself.

She continued, “Years I have journeyed to find you again, returned at last. And here I find promise: Where I found triumph, you shall find the same, and thus return to where you’re meant to be.”

“...What do you mean?”

“That alone. Over long, long lives we seek that place our hearts are meant to return to. Such is our purpose, nothing more or less.”

There was no meaning to her words. Jinya couldn’t make sense of what she was saying at all. But if there was truly some place his ever-present hatred could find rest, he wanted to see it.

“Can I really find such a place?”

“You will. We live for that very purpose.”

Perhaps demons lived such long lives so their dark, lost hearts had the time to search for their destinations.

“Natsu, I... No. You’re not Natsu, are you?” He had understood this presence wasn’t Natsu from the very start, but she looked so similar that he couldn’t help seeing it as an extension of the girl. But that was wrong; she was not Natsu, nor

his sister, but a nameless stranger.

“I’m sorry I can’t call you by your name.” If he asked, she’d probably tell him her name, but he didn’t want to ask. That act was something he saved for those he would kill. It was for the best that she remained a stranger, just some girl he happened to cross paths with under this moon.

“...Thank you. For listening to my grumblings, that is.” He reached into his robe and pulled something out. He might not know who she was, but he knew what she wanted. Somegorou had made sure to tell him. “As thanks, allow me to return you to your better half.” In his hand was the wisteria-engraved hair stick he received from the owner of Kihee.

“Ah...” The stranger looked feverishly at the hair stick. To it, and not Jinya, she called out, “Oh, dear brother...” She brushed it gently, lovingly. “At last, I can touch you...”

A soft, shrill bird warble could be heard, no louder than a whisper, a melody in the night: “*Teppenkaketaka. Teppenkaketaka.*” Its sound drifted along the winds and quickly passed them by.

“Oh...”

There existed a series of encyclopedic books known as *A Survey of Things Past and Present*. Compiled in the Bunsei and Tenpou eras (1818-1844 AD), it contained a record of Japanese historical events, beliefs, and so on. According to one depiction, “There exists a bird with a sonorous voice that takes flight to clear skies. Caught in a cage, it will call out its name: ‘*Teppenkaketaka.*’”

Jinya recognized the unique bird call, clear and resonant as it was. “A cuckoo...?” He recalled the hairpin then. Was it not modeled after a cuckoo?

“My great thanks,” the stranger said. “At last, I, too, may depart...” She took the hair stick from him, removed her own hairpin, and then gently held them together in her hands. Light began to seep through her slender fingers, a pale light that seemed to outdo even the moon. “My brother...let us take our leave as one.” The light took the shape of a cuckoo and began to beat its wings. Natsu—or rather, the stranger who borrowed Natsu’s mouth—said a prayer for happiness, then revealed a smile full of tenderness. The cuckoo took flight into the night.

You have a little somethin' stashed there in your kimono, don't you? I'm willin' to bet its either a comb or a hair stick. Oh, so it was a hair stick, was it? Just give that to the girl, then this'll all be over.

That was all Somegorou had told Jinya to do. Jinya had half doubted whether Natsu would really be helped by doing such a thing, but he certainly couldn't doubt the man any longer, now that things were done.

He caught Natsu as she lost consciousness and collapsed. His gaze was still fixed in the direction the cuckoo had gone.

"Nicely done." At that moment, Somegorou showed up and casually addressed Jinya. He had an aloof, somewhat triumphant air about him.

"Akitsu Somegorou..." Jinya murmured, using the man's full name.

"Why ya gotta be so stiff? Well, whatever. I take it things went off without a hitch?"

Jinya nodded, and Somegorou grinned in response. He seemed neither relieved nor happy, as though he had full knowledge things would end this way. Jinya, on the other hand, didn't understand a single thing that had transpired—much less why.

Somegorou finally deigned to explain. "Didja know hair sticks used to be called hair scratchers?" They were originally used to help tie hair and scratch your scalp without ruining set hair—a ladies' grooming tool, y'know? If they were made by the same craftsman, a hairpin and a hair stick could be considered siblings, in a sense. And since hairpins are used by women, and hair sticks are kept with the swords of men, you could say a hairpin and a hair stick made by the same craftsman would be brother and sister."

"...I think I understand where this is going."

"Right. That there wisteria hair stick is a Somegorou work. And since you held it, you became a brother to that there hairpin."

It was a strange concept to wrap one's head around—a hairpin and a hair stick that were siblings—but it did make sense. Natsu—or rather, the stranger

who had taken hold of Natsu—took every opportunity to snuggle against Jinya's chest. He had thought that was because she wanted to be close to him, but it seemed it was really the hair stick tucked in his kimono she wanted to be close to.

"A hairpin...searching for its brother?" Jinya murmured thoughtfully.

"A bit too much to believe?"

"No, it's just unexpected. I had assumed the feelings of the hairpin's previous owner were what possessed Natsu."

"And that you resembled that previous owner's brother? Ha ha ha, sounds like the contrived plot of some play."

But in the end, it was the hair stick that the hairpin was looking for... Could mere objects really harbor such strong emotions though? Jinya had seen Somegorou's dog spirits, so he knew it wasn't impossible for objects to take form, but something about it all still rubbed him wrong.

Seeing that Jinya still looked lost, Somegorou gently explained it again, like one might with a disciple having trouble learning. "You've seen objects can have emotion and can even take form. In that case, it's not so unbelievable a hairpin might want to be with its brother, right?"

"I suppose..."

"Everyone wants to be with those they love, whether they be human, animal, or even an object."

Perhaps the hairpin had indeed only wished to be with its loved one. Perhaps it had crossed the great divide of time, changing through many hands, on a long, long, journey in search of where it was meant to return to.

"These two were made to be a set pair in the first place. 'When the wisteria petals unfold to bloom, know that the cuckoo's song nears.' It's an old *Manyoshu* poem. The first Akitsu Somegorou had some humor in him, y'see," Somegorou said with a wry grin as he looked at the hairpin and hair stick in Natsu's hand. The poem was about how the cuckoo began to sing around the same time wisteria flowers bloomed. Wisteria and cuckoos had been a favorite subject of many poets since time immemorial.

What reason needs a bird by its flower to stay?

Jinya recalled the words he'd heard. That was no metaphor after all.

"This world is just full of bizarre things, I suppose."

"This, coming from a demon?"

"You got me there." Jinya had to agree: For an inhuman spirit to call something bizarre was itself bizarre.

Playfully, Somegorou said, "Y'know, your initial assumption might not be off the mark though. Perhaps the owner of that hairpin was searchin' for its brother at some point in time."

The cuckoo was long gone into the night. Its destination was a mystery, its past just as unknown. But they were free to imagine what they liked, so that's what Somegorou did.

"Perhaps the hairpin and hair stick were owned by siblings at one time, and when they died, their attachments fused with the objects' own feelings. That sure would make a nice story, wouldn't it?" He spoke with no seriousness whatsoever. "Or maybe they were keepsakes of some married couple somewhere—*no*, of distant lovers who couldn't meet! And they'd look at their keepsakes and be reminded of their promise to love one another and not cheat or somethin' like that."

Jinya let out an exasperated sigh, having little interest in the man's tales. Somegorou didn't seem offended, however, merely shrugging as though saying Jinya was missing out.

"All right, all right. There's no knowin' where the hairpin has been or whose feelings might be tied to it. Nothin' wrong with that."

He looked up at the night sky. Clouds drifted on winds, and a myriad of stars twinkled. Perhaps one of those lights in the sky now was the cuckoo.

Jinya joined the man in looking at the wide, expansive sky.

"Y'know, apparently the cuckoo is considered the reincarnation of some man over in Qing.³ This man, a king, returned to his country after reincarnatin' as a cuckoo. But a long time had passed, in which his country had been invaded and

destroyed. Having lost his home, he lamented, coughin' up blood while cryin' out sadly. That's why the cuckoo is known as the bird that can't return home."

In the long life that awaited him, Jinya was sure to experience something similar. As time passed him by, the place he called home was sure to change until not a trace of its former self was left behind. He felt he could sympathize a little with the poor cuckoo.

As if to clear the gloom that had settled, Somegorou empathetically said, "But *this* cuckoo was able to return to its brother, and that's all that matters."

Its warbles were now distant, and its whereabouts unknown. But it had succeeded in meeting its brother in the end. Perhaps that was enough.

"I wonder where she's headed..." Jinya mused to himself.

"Well, someplace far away, of course. Far beyond this distant sky and wide ocean, to a place far, far away where hearts go to rest. Where exactly that is will remain a mystery only known to the cuckoo, but...I choose to believe it's exactly where she wants to be."

After a long journey, the hairpin finally succeeded in meeting its better half. Perhaps it now journeyed to visit the ones whose feelings had once intertwined with the hairpin's own, so it could tell them the good news. Surely the cuckoo would warble happily again, alongside someone more than happy to hear its story.

"...Yeah. That would be nice." The words slipped absently out of Jinya's mouth, proof they were genuine. Quietly, deep in his heart, he prayed the cuckoo would successfully return to where it wanted to.

He didn't know how long he prayed for. After what could have been an eternity or a mere moment, Somegorou folded his arms and stretched his back, like one might after a long day of work. "All righty then, I think I'm gonna head out." And so, he turned to leave, having no reason to stay any longer.

Without any particular motivation, Jinya stopped him. "Wait."

"Yeah?"

"I'm a demon pretending to be a human."

“Ah. Right, that. I don’t really care,” Somegorou said nonchalantly.

Even if he did consider himself a craftsman before an exorcist, this was just reckless. He grinned wryly at Jinya’s doubtful look. “I mean, you’re an acquaintance of Ofuu, aren’t ya? I’m already turnin’ a blind eye to her, so one more like you is nothin’ much to worry ’bout. Besides, you’re a danger to nobody.”

“But...are you sure?”

“Look, I’m really just a craftsman. I’ll hunt demons if someone pays me to, and I’ll defend myself if someone attacks me. But I ain’t got no business with a demon who means no harm.” But his expression changed suddenly, to the look of a stone-cold demon hunter. “Just don’t forget—at the end of the day, you’re all demons. No matter what you do, you’re an entity to be hunted. No matter how kind Ofuu is, no matter how many people you might save, no matter how much I personally approve of you guys, that fact will never change.”

“...I know.”

“Glad to hear it. Ta-ta.” This time he left in earnest.

Jinya stood there for a while, gazing at the summer moon with Natsu in his arms. He felt he could still hear the faint warbles and wingbeats of the cuckoo.

The next day, at Kihee, the soba restaurant.

“It’s good to see Miss Natsu back to her usual self. But why’s she so in the dumps?”

Zenji was relieved to see Natsu was no longer possessed, but it seemed like she was still bothered by something. “Do you know if something happened, Ofuu?”

“Yes, well... It seems like she kept her memories of what happened,” Ofuu answered.

“Ah, I see...” Zenji nodded in understanding.

Natsu’s recent behavior would be unthinkable to her usual self. She was sure to be overcome with embarrassment right about now. Obviously, the fault lay

with the spirit that had possessed her, but that wouldn't let her feel any less ashamed.

"Yeah, I'd be embarrassed too after that, being all 'Oh, my dear, dear brother' while fawning over Jinya and whatnot."

"You know I can *hear* you, right?" Natsu glared at Zenji with moist eyes.

"W-wait, no, I swear I wasn't making fun of you, Miss Natsu!"

It appeared Zenji was just as prone to gaffes as always.

"Now, now, Natsu-chan, there's no need to take things out on Zenji. C'mon, order whatever you'd like. It's on the house today," the restaurant owner said.

"Mister... Thank you."

"That Jinya-kun's sure taking his sweet time to come over today, huh?" he said, commenting on the ronin's absence.

"Urk." Natsu blushed, remembering again all her exchanges with Jinya.

Noticing her embarrassment, Ofuu gracefully smiled and said, "Any hope of a clam appearing someday soon?"

The men gave Ofuu a mystified look, but Natsu understood. With her finger, she prodded the lucky sparrow netsuke sculpture placed atop the table and replied, "...I'd rather it remained a sparrow still."

She recalled snuggling with Jinya and crossing arms with him. She may not have been in control of herself then, but she didn't *not* like doing those things. That said, it was a little too early to be thinking about gifting clam shells. She slumped onto the table, at her wits' end. "...Ah, jeez. Just how am I supposed to show my face in front of him after all that?"

"Oh my, hee hee," Ofuu giggled. Despite Natsu's grumbling, it was a fact she had come to Kihee today—Kihee, of course, being the place Jinya always ate. It would be a while yet before the young girl understood her own feelings.

Meanwhile, Jinya was in Asakusa. He had no plans to go to Kihee that day, not when there was a risk of meeting Natsu and having to endure the ensuing

awkwardness. He decided he'd wait at least a few days before going back there.

With a sour look, he walked along the main street, the crowds absent with the Lantern Plant Market now over. There, he ran into someone he had never expected to see during the day.

"Why the long face, Ronin?" a coquettish voice called out to him.

"...What a surprise. Streetwalker." It was an unwritten rule that prostitutes only prowled the streets at night. This particular streetwalker wasn't so hideous that she needed darkness to aid her, but it was still strange to see her in the daylight. "Isn't it a bit early for you to be out soliciting men?"

"How rude. And here I thought I'd be nice and try to cheer you up." The streetwalker laughed off his mean comment with a soft, alluring smile.

He had to admit, she sure could take things in stride. She was still as strange to him as ever, but he saw no reason to not talk to her. If anything, it'd be nice to go back to his usual routine a little after the odd events of the previous night.

"Why not chat with me a little?" she suggested. "I have some new rumors you might like to hear."

What perfect timing; he'd like to do nothing more than get his body moving to clear his head.

Just then, a shrill warble echoed.

"Was that...a cuckoo?" he murmured.

Teppenketaka. Teppenketaka. The warble resounded clearly through the summer air. There was no way he wouldn't recognize the sound after hearing it the night before.

"Ah, not again." The streetwalker let out an annoyed sigh. She seemed vulnerable all of a sudden, her usual beguiling look gone. Before he could say anything, she picked up on his question and gloomily spat, "That thing's been bothering me since this morning, from right when I was about to go to sleep, in fact. I'd be resting now if it weren't for it. I get the feeling it's following me too. Strange, isn't it?"

Somegorou had said the cuckoo would return to where it wished to be. If he

supposed that place was by the side of its previous owner, said previous owner likely being a young woman, then perhaps it'd be singing its beautiful melodies to her right about now.

"What? Like what you see?" she teased, as he absentmindedly stared at her.

He didn't know her past. He didn't even know her name. *Anything* could be possible.

"...No, it couldn't be," he murmured. Some things were too fantastical to be true. He took the thought and cut it off at the base.

"Okay, really, what's going on? ...You don't think that cuckoo might be a demon, do you?" A faint look of fear crossed her face as she assumed the worst.

The cuckoo continued to warble in its clear, resounding voice. Jinya was sure it wasn't a demon, but he didn't think it was a regular cuckoo either. There was no knowing the truth, not when he didn't know the past of either the streetwalker or the hairpin. Even if his fantastical thought had actually been right, what would it change?

"It's nothing to worry about." In the end, that was all he could reply with. He closed one eye and bent his ear to the bird's sonorous tone, a slight smile tugging at his lips. "The cuckoo that flew into the night found her flower, is all."

Nothing more, nothing less.

Interlude: Streetwalker in the Rain

1

MAY 2009

Every May, a play was put on for the students of Hyogo prefecture's Modori River High School. One grade at a time, we'd gather in the city's culture hall to "appreciate the fine arts," whatever that meant. As you can probably tell, I wasn't particularly thrilled about having to sit through a play, but it surprised me that many others were, as it was an alternative to being in class.

Once all the students were seated, the lights began to dim. It seemed that things would begin soon.

"Oooh, kinda exciting, huh, Miyaka-chan?" Next to me was my close friend since junior high, Azusaya Kaoru. She was a petite girl with a roundish face who looked younger than her actual age. She kept her hairstyle simple—bundled by a big ribbon worn low on the back of her head—and didn't wear much makeup, both things that made her seem even younger. "Pretty cool we get to watch a play instead of sitting through some boring old classes, huh?"

"Is this really any better? What play are they even doing anyway?"

"Oh, you didn't read the printout?"

"Nah, wasn't interested. Was feeling a bit tired too."

People say I'm too blunt. Kaoru doesn't take offense at my attitude, though, having grown used to how I act over the past three years. I was a bit clumsy when it came to expressing myself, so having someone as patient as her as a friend was a godsend.

"Oh yeah, you mentioned you couldn't sleep last night. It's not like you to forget to read a printout either... Are you feeling all right?" she asked.

"More or less." Truth be told, I was barely hanging on. This might sound like bragging, but I consider myself to be fairly on top of things. However, today my

mind was in such disarray that I couldn't even get through the printout we'd been given. My eyelids were seriously on the verge of shutting; it would be a fight not to fall asleep during the play.

I could never, *never* tell Kaoru the truth, though—that I had trouble sleeping because I was too scared to go to the bathroom at night. I had an image to uphold. A girl my age, afraid of some urban legend like “The Hanako-san that Haunts the Toilet”? ...No, no one must know.

“So, what’s the play?” I asked.

“*Streetwalker in the Rain*, a story about love between a streetwalker and a samurai. Apparently, the heroine was a real person, and the play is based off her memoirs.”

“You don’t say.” I remember learning about streetwalkers back in history class during junior high school. They were prostitutes far, far below the status of the ones in Yoshiwara, and they sold their bodies on the streets, which was a little strange... “Wait, wasn’t the literacy rate low back in the Edo period, especially among women? I could understand an oiran from Yoshiwara being able to write, but a streetwalker...?”

“Oh c’mon, don’t poke holes in a play that hasn’t even started!” she said with a wry grin. I wasn’t trying to poke holes in anything, though. I just found it weird. A bit smugly, she continued, “Well, apparently a lot of prostitutes were from samurai or merchant families but had to turn to prostitution after their households fell to ruin or family members died. The heroine of this play might be one such girl, which is why she could write.”

“Is that so? ...You seem oddly knowledgeable.”

“Eh heh heh. A certain somebody just taught me about this.”

So that was why. I had thought it was strange that someone so unstudious knew such niche information, but it made sense if *he* told her. There was this boy in my class whom I kinda had ties to. He was pretty soft on Kaoru, so there was no doubt in my mind he’d readily tell her something if she asked.

“Oh, looks like they’re starting,” she said.

A buzzer rang, signaling that the play was about to start. The idle chatter in

the hall gradually became a hush.

“Welcome and thank you for coming today. We are the Kukami troupe, here to perform for you *Streetwalker in the Rain*.”

A scattered rumble of applause filled the hall. Slowly, the red curtain began to rise.

It was a rainy evening.

“Whew...” Miura Naotsugu heaved a content sigh as he walked home—for once a bit red in the face after a drinking session, something he seldom was. He had gone to a bar in the Asakusa area with two acquaintances he met through a particular event: Jinya, a ronin, and Zenji, a shop employee. The group had leisurely poured each other drinks, but Jinya’s capacity proved to be rather bottomless, so they ended up drinking a fair bit. Things weren’t so bad that Naotsugu couldn’t walk, but there was a clear stagger to his step. Now, to make matters worse, it had begun to rain, so he was forced to take shelter under the eaves of some random shop.

It was spring now, so winter’s chill was gone, but the nights were still relatively cold.

“No chance it’ll stop soon, huh?” he mumbled absently as he gazed up at the sky. The clouds looked heavy.

Zenji had split off, enthusiastically announcing he was going to the Yoshiwara red-light district to spend the night with whatever girl he could get. Naotsugu was no prude, but he wasn’t exactly comfortable with that type of leisure himself.

Jinya announced he was off to find work, then vanished. He didn’t mean finding a job, as hunting demons was his profession. Chances were he was hitting up another bar, this time in search of rumors.

Naotsugu had work the next day, so he went straight home—or at least he would have if it weren’t for the sudden downpour. Perhaps he’d have been better off tagging along with one of the others instead; it’d sure beat being stuck in the rain.

“Jeez, just my luck,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Oh, tell me about it, dear. I’m utterly drenched because of this rain.”

He was surprised by the sudden coquettish voice. He glanced up and saw someone standing in the rain. They came over leisurely and joined him under the eaves. It was a woman in ragged, wet clothes, hiding her face with a small hand towel. It appeared she was caught out by the rain as well.

“Stuck in the rain are we, Samurai-sama?”

She spoke casually to him, despite him clearly being of the samurai caste by appearance alone. But he wasn’t really the type to humble others, so he let it go. “Indeed, much to my chagrin,” he politely replied.

“That makes two of us then. I guess I won’t be taking any more customers tonight.”

Hearing that, he looked her over again. Ragged clothes, the way she spoke—he easily put two and two together.

“What’s the matter, Samurai-sama? Aha! Are you interested in my services?”

“O-oh, no, I, um, I don’t engage in that sort of behavior...” Despite being a samurai, Naotsugu was humble. He wouldn’t think to disparage the woman for her profession. He turned her down purely because he had never solicited a prostitute before and wasn’t about to start now. Being a rather earnest man, he was fairly divorced from sexual matters.

“Oh dear. It would appear I’ve been rejected.” Seeming to enjoy his fluster, she teased him lightly as she removed her hand towel. “You must be quite green despite your age; or perhaps you are simply hesitant to sleep with a lowly streetwalker?”

He was left bewildered at suddenly being able to see her face. It was shapely, surprisingly so for a streetwalker. She wasn’t beautiful beyond compare or anything like that, but her skin was spotless, enough that makeup was unnecessary for her. She was pale as well, in a sort of fleeting way.

“What? Is it so unusual to see a prostitute?” she teased.

Suddenly aware of the fact that he was staring, he reflexively bowed his head.

“O-oh, I apologize. I didn’t have any ulterior motive, I was just...surprised.”

“...As am I. I’ve never seen a samurai lower his head to a common prostitute before.” This time she was the bewildered one. She assumed samurai were all the arrogant sort, so seeing him act so humbly was a bit perplexing. With a giggle, she said, “You’re a little strange, huh?”

He raised his head and saw she had a genuine smile on her face, one more uplifting than he thought possible, coming from a prostitute. “Am I? I suppose people do often say I act overly formal...”

“But even toward a prostitute?”

“Is that really so odd?”

The conversation petered out there, and then it was just the sound of the rain. Their shared silence wasn’t uncomfortable, however. Her presence felt very natural, as though she were a part of the night itself. Suddenly, he didn’t mind being stuck in the rain.

“It just won’t let up, will it?” What felt like an eternity but could have just been a mere moment passed by, and the rain still hadn’t stopped. Apparently fed up with waiting, the streetwalker sauntered out from under the eaves while gazing up at the gray clouds above.

“Hey. You’ll get wet.”

“I’m already wet; what’s a little more rain going to do now? So long, Samurai-sama.”

“W-wait!” he called out to stop her. Gracefully, she spun around to look at him. She studied his face as he stood there frozen, not knowing what to say next despite having stopped her. He blushed under her gaze but couldn’t stand there frozen forever, so he forced some words out. “Um... Ah. Right. Names. My name is Miura Naotsugu. Would you be willing to share your name with me?”

The words he found in his desperation were a surprise even to him. He would normally never even think to so casually ask the name of a woman he’d just met. That was the base, crude behavior of men with ulterior motives. He cursed his own carelessness, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“Streetwalker,” she answered with a soft smile. He blanked for a moment, having not expected her to actually answer. “If you must call me something, then let that be my name—‘Streetwalker.’”

He took in the scene before his eyes in its entirety: her pale skin, the soft rain, her drenched, jet-black hair, the way she seemed to fade into the night—and her smile. There was something about her smile that just seemed so...real.

He found her beautiful. For the first time ever, he was *spellbound* by a woman.

...If he had just stayed spellbound and kept his eyes on her, then maybe it would have all ended there—nothing more than an all-too-common meeting of two strangers on a rainy night. But in his bashfulness, he averted his gaze ever so slightly and saw...*him*.

“...Hm?”

Standing in the rain was a person Naotsugu couldn’t quite make out through the downpour. From their outline, however, it seemed to be a man. Naotsugu felt as though he’d seen them before—many times, as a matter of fact. But not since long, long ago.

Him. It was *him*.

“...Brother?”

The man was no more than a black shape from where Naotsugu stood, and yet he had the strangest feeling he was his dead older brother.

“Ah... Him.” The streetwalker sighed, paying little mind to Naotsugu’s fluster. She listlessly, but firmly, kept her eyes on the man even as the rain poured down on her.

“Do you know that man?” Naotsugu asked.

She continued to stare with lifeless eyes, as though gazing wistfully at some distant scenery. Naotsugu felt he detected a faint look of resignation in her gaze. She was drenched in cold rain but didn’t shiver—or even move at all. As if to convince herself, she murmured with some annoyance in her voice, “He’s just some man I used to know.”

It was year two of the Ansei era (1855 AD), and tonight was a night of fierce rains that sent petals scattering.

The next day, Naotsugu ducked through the entrance curtains of the soba restaurant Kihee and was quickly greeted with a smile from Ofuu, the restaurant's waitress.

"Oh, welcome, Miura-sama."

"Hey," he weakly responded, then heaved a sigh. The streetwalker he met the previous night had ultimately ignored the unknown man who had appeared and left. Naotsugu himself returned home without incident. He had crawled into bed once he got home but didn't get much sleep as thoughts of his could-be brother and—honestly, mainly—the streetwalker kept him up.

"Oh, Jin-dono." After scanning the restaurant, Naotsugu saw Jinya was there—which was not much of a surprise. Jinya came to Kihee a lot. In fact, he probably ate soba daily.

After a quick nod, Naotsugu sat at Jinya's table and ordered a kake soba. He sat silently as he waited.

"Is something the matter?"

"Huh? Oh, no, not at all."

Naotsugu was usually the one to initiate conversation, but today Jinya did so instead. Naotsugu had tried to keep his worries from showing on his face, but it appeared he failed.

The restaurant owner popped his head out of the kitchen and, having picked up on Naotsugu's sour mood himself, roared with laughter. "Worried about something *again*, Naotsugu-sama? You sure like worrying a lot. One kake ready."

"Coming!" Ofuu called back. She carried over the fresh soba, steam rising from it, and placed it on the table. But Naotsugu made no move for his chopsticks, just looked at his food with an awkward smile on his face. Seeing this, Ofuu said, "We're all ears if you want to share."

“No, no, it’s really nothing at all.”

“I don’t believe a word of that,” the restaurant owner interjected. “Not from you, at least. Hey, Jinya-kun, a little help here?”

“If he doesn’t want to talk, he doesn’t want to talk,” Jinya said before returning to his noodles, minding his own business. If it were something involving demons, he’d likely press for answers, but he’d never force someone to talk about personal worries. He appeared a cold, curt man, but he was actually rather considerate.

“Yes, but still...” The restaurant owner seemed unconvinced.

“I’m fine, really. How about this then—if I ever do need help, I’ll make sure to come straight to you all. Does that sound fair?” Naotsugu spoke as reassuringly as he could, hoping to ease their worry.

It seemed to do the trick, as the restaurant owner backed off. “Feh, you can be surprisingly stubborn. Just who exactly do you take after, I wonder?”

“Dad...”

“Right, right, sorry.”

Ofuu quickly chided her father for his overly familiar comment. Naotsugu couldn’t help but smile at how close the two were.

“Oh yeah, how did last night go, Jin-dono?” he asked. He vaguely recalled Jinya saying he was going to search for work and was curious if he had found any rumors, especially after seeing that unknown man last night.

“I managed to hear an interesting rumor,” Jinya replied.

“Demon-related?”

“Most likely.” Jinya only ever called a rumor interesting when it seemed like a particularly troublesome demon was involved. “I’ll be visiting Asakusa again tonight to check it out.”

Naotsugu’s thoughts paused upon hearing that. He wondered, *Will she be in Asakusa tonight as well?*

NAMES HAD ALWAYS been meaningless.

Her father was a samurai, which made her the daughter of a samurai family. However, the samurai family she was born to was poverty-stricken, and they arranged her marriage to a man she knew nothing about, not even his name. For an impoverished samurai family like hers, marriage was perhaps the only way a daughter could be of use. She wasn't acting out of a sense of duty to the family but because it was her role as the daughter of a samurai family.

The samurai who would be her husband asked, "What is your name?"

Calmly, she answered the way she felt was right. "I am 'The Daughter of a Samurai Family.'" She was not here by her own will, but to ensure her household survived. If she were to be called something, why shouldn't that be her name—The Daughter of a Samurai Family? After all *she* was not what either side wanted—what they cared about was *her role*.

But the man took her words as mockery, so he annulled the engagement, despite having his own reasons to seek a marriage in the first place. With their last thread of hope slipping from their fingers, the household fell to ruin—and so she was no longer even The Daughter of a Samurai Family.

Her father passed away a broken man, her mother cursed her verbally, but she didn't care about either of them. She didn't feel an ounce of guilt at all. How could she? Her parents had never shown her the love she needed to love them back. She had been nothing more than a tool to them. Now that all their roles no longer existed, they might as well just be strangers.

The only person who even weighed on her mind, ever so slightly, was her missing older brother. But they would never have a chance to meet again, so she immediately gave up on the idea.

And so, she became alone, with none who would call her by name. She did not lament, however, for her parents had taught her well: No matter where she went or who she became, she would be fine as long as she had a role.

Names had always been meaningless anyway.

Naotsugu walked to Asakusa once the sun went down. He was on its main street when it began to rain again. This time, he made sure to bring an umbrella along. The umbrella did nothing to stave off the cold, however. He shivered slightly as he continued to walk, eventually arriving at the eaves he had huddled under the night before. He folded his umbrella and took shelter there. He couldn't believe he was actually doing this, but he waited there, nonetheless.

The night grew long, and the rain poured down harder.

"Oh, it's you again. Don't feel like using your umbrella?" Eventually, a woman with a tattered umbrella and loosely worn, shabby clothes came along. Her pale skin was wet with the night's rain, and her slight smile carried a bewitching allure.

"Good evening, Streetwalker-dono."

"'Streetwalker-dono'? What a strange thing to call someone."

"That's the name you gave me to work with, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

She joined him and took shelter under the eaves. They were a strange sight to see, as they both carried umbrellas, but Naotsugu had no time to care. He was nervous. Despite having come all this way to wait for her, he didn't know what to do now that she was actually here.

"So, what brings you here, Samurai-sama?" she asked. It was as though her eyes saw right through him.

"Oh, uh, well..." He felt as if his unvoiced thoughts were an open book to her and was greatly flustered because of it, even though he was probably the older one of the two. The only interests he could talk about were swords and maybe alcohol—not exactly exciting topics for a woman. His stiff personality was the biggest problem, however. Still, he tried. "There was someone here I just couldn't stop thinking about..."

"Oh? Who?"

You—was what he wanted to say, but he wasn't bold enough. So, instead he said, "That man I saw in the darkness."

He wasn't lying. That figure in the rain who so resembled his older brother had stayed in his mind. They were looking at the streetwalker back then, weren't they? Why?

"Him? I told you, he's just some man I used to know." Her cold, emotionless voice was frighteningly clear in the rain.

Perhaps the man was a customer she had slept with before... He felt something grip his heart then. It suddenly felt difficult to breathe, but even so, he wanted to know the truth.

However, he was cut short before he could ask.

"I didn't think you were so crude as to try and dredge up a woman's past, much less a prostitute's," she said.

It was not too hard to imagine how difficult the life of a prostitute must be. While some fared better than others, they were still all part of a horrible system. Trying to uncover her past like this was, indeed, crude of him.

"Forgive me. That was rude of me," he immediately apologized.

She frowned, troubled and unsure how to react to a samurai bowing his head to her, a prostitute, even though this was the second time it had happened.

"You're rather humble, Samurai-sama."

"Please, call me Naotsugu if you'd like."

"...Thank you, Samurai-sama. Now, what business did you have with me?" She smiled flirtatiously without calling him by name. She looked mesmerizing, but somehow sad as well. "Surely you didn't expect me to believe you're here for some man?"

Upon hearing the man mentioned, Naotsugu felt that same worry flare in him again. He was bad at hiding things, so his discomfort easily showed on his face, but the streetwalker pretended not to notice for his sake. He said, "I don't have 'business' with you—at least, not exactly. I just wanted to meet you again."

"That's all?"

"It is."

"You can find cheap streetwalkers like me anywhere, though."

“I wanted to meet *you*, specifically.” His tone was surprisingly firm. He was fine with being teased by her, but hearing her speak self-disparagingly was sad, and a little frustrating.

Sensing his faint anger, she apologized. “Sorry. I took my joke too far.”

“No, I'm the one who should apologize; I was acting childish as well. But I really did come just because I wanted to meet you again. That's all.” He could've given a multitude of other plausible reasons for coming, but they all rang hollow to him. He wanted to meet her—and that was genuinely all there was to it.

“You really are strange.” She sighed, then smiled—not the smile of a prostitute but the smile of an ordinary woman. He found himself captivated by the gentleness in her smile, and the two spent some time peacefully together.

But their peaceful moment didn't last long.

“Ah...”

He appeared today as well.

The rain was violent, slamming against the earth with intensity; ill-fitting for spring, the so-called season of flowers. Amid that rain, a dark figure stood, looking toward the two.

He just stood there. He didn't approach them, he didn't shout, he didn't attack—just stood there, unmoving in the rain.

His appearance was indiscernible through the rain, but no matter how much Naotsugu looked, he still felt the man looked like his older brother, Miura Sadanaga.

“Why do you choose now of all times to appear?” the streetwalker murmured. Maybe this man she ‘used to know’ wasn't someone she had once slept with after all. Her voice carried a familial love she couldn't fully hide—and yet, she trembled. For reasons unknown to Naotsugu, she trembled.

Naotsugu quickly stepped in front of her. Perhaps his action was meaningless, but he wanted to hide her from the dark figure's sight regardless.

She leaned against his back ever so slightly. Her faint weight felt comforting;

perhaps this was his reward for his clumsy display of kindness.

Ba-dump, ba-dump. A heart raced. Whose it was would remain unknown.

The rain continued to pour. A spring breeze blew by, still carrying the lingering chill of winter. But right now, even the breeze felt warm.

Before long, the dark figure disappeared, perhaps washed away with the rain.

“Is something the matter? It’s not like you to leave your food sitting.”

“Hm? Oh...” The day after his visit to Asakusa, Jinya came to Kihee and ordered kake soba for the umpteenth time. However, he didn’t touch his food when it came; his mind seemed to be elsewhere.

“Your noodles will get soggy, you know.” Ofuu said.

“You’re right. I should eat.” At her urging, he finally began to eat, but he soon stopped as the events of the prior night filled his mind.

Jinya always had a surly look about him, but he seemed in an even worse mood than usual today. Worried why that might be, Ofuu bent down so she was face-to-face with him, then asked, “You went demon hunting yesterday, right? Did something serious happen?”

“...Nothing worth mentioning.”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, I won’t force you to, but I am worried for you.” Her eyes showed concern.

Out of everyone he knew, Jinya could let down his guard around Ofuu the most—not just because they were both demons but also because she so readily worried for his sake. With little hesitation, he replied, “I just had some trouble with a demon last night. Nothing serious.”

“You? Trouble with a demon?” She knew full well how strong he was, so it was a surprise to hear something could go awry for him. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Last night Jinya had gone to Asakusa after hearing a rumor of a demon there.

He successfully found said demon and fought it in the rain. It wasn't particularly strong; by all means, he should've been able to slay it while coming out unscathed. And yet, he wavered and let it slip away. He hadn't been too weak. His emotions simply got in the way. How pathetic he was. Despite touting how much he wanted to get stronger, he still hesitated.

"Will you be going to Asakusa again today, then?" Ofuu asked.

"It depends on the weather. The demon I'm after only appears when it rains. I've been blessed with two days of rain so far; I can only hope for a third."

"Huh? But..." She was about to say something, but someone passed under the entrance curtain just then. "Oh, welcome."

The customer was a familiar face: one of Kihee's very few regulars, Miura Naotsugu Arimori. He saw Jinya upon entering and made a beeline for him. He looked flustered, almost as much as he did the time he was looking for his missing older brother. "Jin-dono, are you free right now?"

Come to think of it, he had also looked rather troubled the day before. Jinya wasn't confident he could help with non-demon-related matters, but it cost nothing to lend an ear. He tensed a bit, seeing how somber Naotsugu was, and nodded. "I am."

"Thank you. What's troubling me isn't a demon-related matter, though; I apologize for that." Naotsugu looked at Ofuu and the restaurant owner and added, "And, if possible, I'd like both of you two to listen to my problem."

"Huh? Me too?" the restaurant owner said.

"Yes. I'd appreciate your counsel."

"Hmm, well, I suppose I don't mind. What about you, Ofuu?"

"I don't mind either."

Naotsugu thanked them both with a grateful bow. He sat at a random nearby table and began to share his issue.

"Where should I start..." He racked his brain for a moment and paused in thought, the atmosphere in the restaurant growing tense as time passed in silence. Everyone waited with bated breath, sensing some dire issue about to

be revealed.

Eventually, Naotsugu looked up and met their eyes, then soberly began to speak. “It would appear I’ve fallen for a woman.”

Could you really blame the three for freezing over at the sheer unexpectedness of his words?

Naotsugu told them of the streetwalker he met. In order, he described their chance meeting on a rainy night, of how captivated he was by their simple, casual conversations, and of the dark figure that appeared.

Partway through, Jinya realized the woman Naotsugu was talking about was the streetwalker he knew. *That* overly rigid Naotsugu, falling for *that* streetwalker? Frankly, it was hard to believe. But then again, love worked in mysterious ways, so Jinya didn’t say anything and just listened.

“No kidding. All that happened after we parted that day?” Zenji let out an impressed murmur. Midway through Naotsugu’s recounting of events, he had shown up with Natsu. Naotsugu now had quite the audience.

“Personally, I want to hear more about a *certain someone’s* trip to Yoshiwara instead.” Natsu shot a mean glare Zenji’s way. Zenji, you see, had inadvertently let it slip that he had been to the Yoshiwara red-light district.

“Ack! B-but, uh, Naotsugu’s story sounds a lot more important! We should hear him out first!” Zenji quickly urged things along. “To sum things up, you want to get her to fall for you, right?”

“Oh. Well, not exactly. I just want to grow a little closer to her,” Naotsugu answered.

“Mhm, sure... Let me guess: You’re head over heels for her, but you’re hesitant to act because of your status as a samurai.”

With a conflicted look, Naotsugu replied, “I can’t deny that. As you say, I have a duty to marry the partner my parents choose for me...” For samurai, marriage was done for the household’s benefit. Naotsugu turned twenty this year, so it wouldn’t be strange if he had already been preparing for marriage talks.

However, he continued with a serious expression, “But that doesn’t change the fact that I love her.”

“Well said!” Zenji slapped Naotsugu’s back with a broad smile. Jinya’s silence was his approval. The girls looked a bit bewildered, however. Neither of them had expected the heir of a samurai family to discuss his love with them, especially not his love for a *streetwalker*.

“You’re serious?” Natsu asked, slight revulsion on her face. The lowliest of prostitutes together with a samurai? Unimaginable.

“I am,” Naotsugu answered. “I understand she is a prostitute. Many will likely disapprove of her.” A streetwalker was a disdained occupation. Naotsugu knew that and found Natsu’s reaction understandable. “But I still want to know her. What I’ll do after that, I’ll decide then.”

There wasn’t a trace of hesitation or uncertainty in his voice. Realizing he was serious, Natsu backed off.

“You’re surprisingly passionate, Miura-sama.” Ofuu smiled nostalgically, as though she saw another man’s past kindness as she looked at Naotsugu. The bonds of family weren’t so easily erased, it seemed. Jinya smiled slightly as he came to that same conclusion.

“You’ve grown into quite the man, eh?” the restaurant owner said. “Say, maybe you should think about marrying soon too, Ofuu.”

“Dad, like I’ve said...”

Despite her exasperation, the harmonious father-daughter pair were a heartwarming sight.

With the mood now light, Jinya—who had been listening quietly up until then—concisely summed things up with a serious look. “So, you want to start a relationship with that woman?”

“No, er, well, not quite. As I’ve said, I just want to get closer to her.” Naotsugu understood he was in love with the woman, but having that stated so frankly still embarrassed him.

“I see. Regardless, I doubt I can be of much help here.” Until now, Jinya only

had thoughts of becoming stronger on his mind. There was a time long, long ago when he had a woman he loved, but that never bore fruit. He was in no position to offer advice on these matters.

“Looks like it’s my time to shine.” Seeing Jinya throw in the towel, Zenji volunteered himself with a confident grin.

“And what ingenious plan do you have, pray tell,” Natsu said.

“We’ll have Naotsugu swoop in and save the woman he likes from some scoundrel who’s after her!”

“You’re kidding.” Natsu was left aghast by his unbelievably clichéd suggestion.

Zenji was not kidding, however. In fact, he seemed absolutely certain his plan would work. “Just trust me on this, Miss Natsu. Women absolutely *swoon* for a man who can protect them!”

“Even if that were true, it’s not like a scoundrel would just conveniently appear and go after her for us,” Jinya said with a sigh. Even someone with as little experience with romance as him knew this was a harebrained plan.

Zenji put a hand on Jinya’s shoulder, a joyous grin wider than before on his face. “What’re you talking about? *You’re* going to be our scoundrel, Jinya. With your height and those fierce eyes, you’re just what we need! You’ll go ‘assault’ her, then Naotsugu will appear to ‘save’ her! It’s a perfect plan!”

The plan was full of holes in actuality, but Zenji seemed certain it would work. He looked to Naotsugu.

“Hmm...” Naotsugu actually considered the ridiculous plan. A samurai crossing blades with a scoundrel to protect a woman was indeed a fairly common trope in books and theater. But even in his imagination, he couldn’t see himself besting Jinya in a duel. “Ha ha, oh, very funny, Zenji-dono. But there’s no way I could beat Jin-dono.”

“Don’t worry about that; it’ll all only be an act! Jinya will hold back, right?” Zenji looked to Jinya.

“I’m actually not fully on board with this plan, to be frank. I’ll try to play along if you really want, but I make no promises,” he replied. To draw one’s blade was

to use it. He could try and hold himself back, but accidents could always happen. Plus, he had reservations about using a sword as a “prop.”

“Oh c’mon! You both are buzzkills!”

“I think you’re asking too much from these two...” Ofuu said with an exasperated look. Jinya and Naotsugu were both rigid men, just in different ways. Whether Ofuu’s exasperation was at Zenji or the two men wasn’t clear.

“Well, I thought it was a pretty good idea,” Zenji said, his shoulders slumping. He sipped the tea Ofuu had poured for him while he was speaking, then looked to the restaurant owner. “Do you have any ideas, Mister?”

Without hesitation, the restaurant owner replied, “I’d say he’s just gotta keep at it.” He spoke his words so casually that they almost slipped by unnoticed.

“Keep...at it?” Naotsugu repeated questioningly.

The restaurant owner roared with laughter, not a hint of seriousness to him. “Yep, exactly that. For example, hey, Jinya-kun—have you always been strong enough to hunt demons?”

“No.”

“And you, Zenji-san, you didn’t become a full-fledged employee of Sugaya the moment you joined, did ya?”

“Well, of course not.”

This was all obvious, of course. Jinya had sparred as a child and was easily outclassed. But he practiced and practiced and practiced, and before he knew it, he could hunt demons.

All at once, it dawned on Jinya what the man was getting at. “Ah. You’re right.”

“If you want to become strong, you gotta practice. If you want to move up at work, you gotta work hard. If you want to win someone’s heart, well, you gotta put in the time. The world’s not so simple that doing that alone will make everything go well, but I do think it’s better than trying something drastic.”

The restaurant owner grinned proudly. There was no guarantee his method would work, but it certainly rang true. There were no shortcuts to winning

someone's heart. He continued, "Incidentally, I personally spent almost twenty years slowly winning over a certain wonderful girl's heart, so I have some ground to stand on." That girl was of course Ofuu, for whom he gave up everything and then some to become her father. His advice was simple but convincing.

Jinya glanced at Ofuu from the corner of his eye and saw she was doing the same, their gazes coincidentally meeting. They both smiled at the silliness of the coincidence.

"Hm? Something up?" Natsu asked with a tilt of her head.

"Oh, it's nothing."

"No, nothing."

They both spoke at the same time, the sameness of their replies again prompting smiles.

Natsu sulked with a huff. She probably felt left out, but this wasn't something they could easily explain. They both shared a wry grin.

"I see," Naotsugu said firmly after a short silence. "Indeed. The first thing to do before all else is to keep meeting up with her."

"Right. Just keeping at it earnestly without overthinking things is what's best for you, Naotsugu-sama."

"You might be right. I'll go wait for her under the eaves where we waited out the rain. Thank you very much for your help. Until next time." With a sunny expression, Naotsugu stood from his seat and ducked under the entrance curtains. He didn't eat a single bite of soba, but he looked satisfied nonetheless.

"...So, in the end, Ofuu's dad solved everything himself," Natsu said.

Jinya and Zenji awkwardly avoided her gaze. Jinya hadn't even managed to put forth an idea.

"What can I say? Wisdom comes with age," the restaurant owner said frivolously—but something about him did look dependable.

Ofuu seemed oddly bothered, however. She thought over Naotsugu's last words and mumbled, "They waited out the rain...?"

“Hm? What’s wrong, Ofuu? Did I say something I shouldn’t have again?” the restaurant owner asked.

“No... It’s just that Miura-sama said something strange.”

“Strange how?”

She looked at Jinya. “Actually, what you said earlier was strange as well, Jinya-kun.”

Jinya thought about what he had said earlier. A demon was involved, so certainly many things could be described as “unnatural,” but strange? Nothing stood out in particular. He hadn’t noticed anything off about what Naotsugu had said either.

Her next words bewildered him, however.

“I’m pretty sure it hasn’t rained once these past couple of days.”

3

THERE WAS a limit to how much one person could know. No matter how sagacious or studious someone was, they could only see the world they see.

Take the overly serious samurai who had just left the restaurant, for instance. Until the end, he would remain unaware of the fact that it hadn't rained for the past couple of days. Similarly, the man who hunts demons had no way of knowing just what the streetwalker saw in the rain. The others within the restaurant were even further removed from it all and would never know what occurred.

Every person lives their own life and remains blissfully ignorant of the lives of others. People can only see the story they themselves lead, and because of that, *Streetwalker in the Rain* can be nothing more than a tale of love between a streetwalker and a samurai.

But one mustn’t forget: *Unseen* and *absent* are not one and the same. Even if one cannot see the truth, it exists. And so long as it exists...

The fierce rain made an ear-splitting rumble, and a white cloud of exhaled breath formed in the cold spring night. The tattered umbrella failed to block the rain completely, leaving her shoulders wet. In a puddle, she saw the reflection of the eaves and went under them. It was merely coincidence that this was the same set of eaves as the previous night; the streetwalker had no grander hopes than to wait out the rain.

“I suppose even he wouldn’t come by for a third day.” Her murmur was drowned out by the rain. There was a tinge of disappointment in her voice that she pretended not to notice. There was a chance she would meet that strange samurai again by coming here, but so what? It wasn’t as if she had any business with him. Whether he came or not meant nothing at all to her.

A slight chill remained despite it being spring. She trembled slightly from the cold, then looked up at the expanse of blackness that hung above. Heavy rain poured with no end in sight, and the cold night dredged up memories of the distant past. They appeared before her, beyond the rain, but were subsequently washed away.

Her story was nothing special. She was born to a samurai family that fell into poverty and ended up a prostitute. It was an all-too-common case of misfortune that one could hear just about anywhere. Her life before hadn’t been all that great either, though—it certainly wasn’t something she longed to return to. The only thing she missed at all was maybe her older brother, the only one who properly treated her like family. He would sometimes splurge to buy her expensive accessories, even though their family had little money to spare. He bought her a high-end cuckoo bird hairpin once. Just where had that gone over the years?

“...Come...”

It was a mistake to reminisce. Mixed with the sound of rain was a feeble voice almost entirely drowned out. Her heart froze over. Slowly, she turned her gaze toward that voice and saw a dark figure in the rain.

“Ah...”

Someone she had moved past, someone who couldn’t possibly be here now, was standing there and looking at her.

It's not real, she told herself, but she trembled anyway—not because of the cold nor because of fear. Just what was it that made her tremble so?

She was a nameless streetwalker now, and she was fine with that. Or at least, she had believed she was fine with that. This specter from the past seemed to find fault with who she was now.

“Come with me...”

No. This isn't real. He couldn't possibly be here.

But her feet seemed to move on their own. Weakly, she walked forward.

The dark figure didn't move, waiting for his lost sister's return.

“Brother...” She continued to stagger up to the figure.

The rain showed no sign of stopping.

It was night now, so the shops lining Asakusa's main street were all closed for the day. The usual din of human activity was absent, replaced by the thunderous roar of rain. A man stood alone without an umbrella, seemingly unfazed by the droplets buffeting him.

“This rain doesn't seem likely to let up soon.”

Jinya slowly unsheathed his sword. His eyes were trained on a dark figure ahead of him that seemed to simultaneously float above and sink into its surroundings. Something was clearly inhuman about the figure. It gave off no malice, which made Jinya even more bitter about what needed to be done.

He caught wind of a strange rumor the night he drank with Zenji and Naotsugu. Apparently, there was a mysterious dark figure that only appeared when it rained at night. There were many firsthand accounts of sightings, but none of the details ever lined up. Some said the figure was a brawny man, others described a slender one. One said it was a fair maiden, another said they saw a decrepit old hag. Nothing was consistent. A strange rumor indeed.

Jinya visited Asakusa's main street for several nights. He ended the first night

empty-handed, but he encountered the dark figure on the second. He looked at it carefully, trying to ascertain its identity, and was shocked by who he saw. He attacked the figure, but his blade lacked the usual deftness it had, and the figure was able to escape.

He was too stunned to even think about what happened. He glared off in the direction the figure fled, its silhouette so nostalgic.

And now, the next night, he encountered the dark figure again.

His heart wavered slightly. He remembered the warmth and kindness he was shown after fleeing his home and drifting so far. A figure from that distant past overlapped now with the figure he saw obscured by the rain.

“I hesitated yesterday,” he said. The person he saw was just too sentimental to him. He could barely make out their silhouette through the rain, but the impression they left was the same as he remembered from all those years ago—that was why it was so difficult to attack them. He still shamefully yearned for the feeling from those transient days that had long since burst, like bubbles on the surface of water. Even so, he couldn’t cling to the past forever. “But I won’t hesitate today.”

The rain grew heavier. How fortunate. With this, the dark figure was even more obscured, and it would be a little easier to cut down.

He put strength into his arms and legs, then set his whole body in motion. He sprung forth and closed in on the figure. With a step in, he raised his sword high and swung downwards.

Seeing the dark figure up close took his breath away.

Oh, what a nostalgic sight it was.

The rain grew heavier later into the night. The crashing droplets echoed a cacophony, but things sounded near-silent for Naotsugu, as his mind was at peace. With the restaurant owner’s advice taken to heart, he walked to where the streetwalker would be—or rather, to the eaves he hoped to find her under. He didn’t know if he’d find her there, but that was fine. He would take his time to get to know her, and to let her know him.

His heart raced unbecomingly fast for a grown man. The streaks of pouring rain did not let up, but he felt rather agreeable regardless. His lips curled into a slight smile as he neared the eaves, but upon reaching his destination, he froze.

There in the rain, he saw the streetwalker walking with uneasy steps. A chill ran down his spine as he saw the dark figure standing ahead of her.

He dropped his umbrella and ran to her, firmly grabbing her shoulders. She didn't stop walking, taking a couple more steps before becoming unable to move forward. She finally turned to look at him then, saying, "...Huh? ... Samurai-sama?" Her eyes were lifeless. She looked at him, but at the same time, she didn't.

"What are you doing?"

"He's...calling for me..." Her voice was emotionless; she responded out of sheer reflex.

"Come to your senses!" He shook her shoulders, causing her gaze to become more lucid. Her expression tensed some as strength returned to her voice.

"Ah... That's right. There's no way he could be here. But maybe..."

"No! That's not what you think it is." To him, it sounded as though she had lost her mind.

She turned to look at the dark figure again. An expression that was neither quite grief nor sadness crossed her face. She had called that figure a man from her past. From the look of things, it resembled someone she loved. Even so, Naotsugu couldn't let her approach it.

The figure continued to stand there, not moving a step, just watching them. No, it merely *felt* like it was watching. It didn't seem intent on doing anything in particular, but that in itself was unsettling. Its outline was a blur through the rain, but now that Naotsugu was closer, he could tell the figure that once resembled his brother was anything but.

"That *thing* isn't human!" There was no other way to express it. He had thought it was a person last night, but he now knew better. Even from only two ken away—around a dozen steps' distance—the dark figure remained just that: a dark figure.

“What? I don’t understand...” the streetwalker looked at him, baffled.

He was baffled as well. He could see four limbs, as well as a blurry outline in the shape of a person. But it had no face. No skin. It hadn’t appeared to be a dark figure because he saw it from a distance—*it was just a dark mass*.

Even so, the streetwalker continued to insist it was whoever she saw. “Look, don’t you see him?”

At this point, he thought she had gone mad. But he then remembered that there were beings in this world that made the supernatural happen with ease—he’d experienced such an event himself, in fact.

“A demon...” He remembered superior demons all had abilities that exceeded what man thought possible. He then let go of the streetwalker and stepped before her. Glaring at the dark figure, he unsheathed his sword and took up stance.

“Samurai-sama, what are you doing?!”

“Streetwalker-dono, please, calm down.” He felt her tug at his clothes, but he didn’t turn around.

Naotsugu was a secretary who mainly organized documents. This was the first time he’d ever drawn his sword against anyone. He had learned swordsmanship, but would that be of any use here? The sword in his hands now was heavier than any wooden one he’d held before, and his hands trembled. Still, he wouldn’t run. Even if he were to fight what was a superior demon, it was not the samurai way to flee like a coward.

A samurai must be just and courageous and never forget benevolence and respect; they must serve Tokugawa loyally and be willing to fight in the name of the Shogun. These were the tenets of a samurai that Naotsugu’s mother had drilled into him. Even if their family wasn’t affluent and their status was low, to uphold these tenets was a samurai’s pride.

“I am a samurai of Tokugawa and have sworn to defend those who cannot defend themselves.” Him standing here now had purpose. “I swear by my sword, Streetwalker-dono, that thing there is not the person you wish it to be.”

Something about the streetwalker changed slightly. He could tell, even

without turning around to look.

He wasn't strong like Jinya, who made hunting demons his living. Naotsugu trembled as he stood holding his sword, but he would persist. "Please, believe me."

The hand clutching his clothes fell away. Naotsugu charged forward at full speed. He had never before traded blows with someone in earnest and he likely wouldn't win this fight. But it was precisely because of that understanding that he didn't hesitate now.

He gave a short, invigorating shout as he raised his blade. He looked at his opponent where its eyes would be. It made no move. That was fine by him—he would end this before it could retaliate.

"H-haaah!" He put strength into his arms, but before he could swing downwards, he stopped at the sight before him: The dark figure had split in two, bisected down the middle.

How? His sword hadn't even touched it.

Confused, he stared at the now-split dark figure. Gradually, its hazy outline grew even more indistinguishable until finally it began to scatter into the dark night.

"Huh?"

It faded away, first into fog, then mist, then finally into mere air. By no action of his own, the figure washed away with the rain.

Naotsugu relaxed for a moment but soon tensed once again. Behind the dark figure was yet another figure. He readied his sword again. This new figure wasn't a shapeless black mass but a thin and well-built tall man. He had a sword in hand, and a fine one at that. A sword of such masterwork was exceedingly rare. The man was hunched forward post-slash, unmoving. Slowly, he righted himself.

A cold sweat ran down Naotsugu's brow, mixing with rain. The tall man raised his face and shot Naotsugu a sharp glare.

"Hm? Naotsugu?"

Relief washed over him. The rain-soaked man was a familiar face.

Perhaps because the figure was gone, the rain was gradually weakening. The three, all drenched by now, returned to the eaves and looked up at the sky. The clouds were gradually thinning as they moved along. The rain would let up soon.

“You’re surprisingly strong, Samurai-sama,” the streetwalker said with some astonishment.

“Huh? Oh, no, um...” It seemed she hadn’t seen what really happened from where she stood. The one who actually cut down the dark figure was Jinya, not him. Naotsugu was about to correct her, but Jinya spoke up first.

“I’m surprised as well. I didn’t think you’d have the guts to strike like that.” Jinya’s flat voice had a faint, happy ring to it. He, who knew what really happened, still seemed impressed with Naotsugu.

“But I—” Naotsugu was about to say something, but Jinya interrupted him with a shake of his head, as though to say, “Let her misunderstand.” Naotsugu was about to object further, but the streetwalker spoke up.

“Hey, Ronin,” she said.

Naotsugu was surprised to hear her address Jinya like that, as it meant the two were already acquainted. He didn’t think Jinya was the type to pay for prostitutes, however, so how did they know each other?

She continued, “Just what was that dark figure anyway? A demon?”

Naotsugu quickly shelved his thoughts as this was far more pressing a question to him. Who was that figure, and just what had happened? He also looked to Jinya for answers.

“That figure was a mass of lingering attachments that couldn’t become a demon,” he answered. He was as stone-faced as ever, but his eyes were narrowed slightly. “That’s why it had no physical form and could be perceived as anything. It was probably drawn to the lingering attachments of others.”

Demons could be born from nothingness, negative emotion given form. The

dark figure hadn't the density to become a demon, but it was also too dense to scatter, so it remained in this world. It was formed not from hatred or malice, but of lingering attachments, likely that of souls departed, that gathered and tried to take form by some unknown means.

He continued, "It became whatever the viewer had lingering attachments toward. It was powerless—not even a demon, just emotion. Even I have never seen such a thing before."

Like a mirror, it reflected the viewer's emotions that kept them tied to something from their past. Naotsugu saw his brother because he still held an attachment toward him. But he had already come to terms with his brother's fate. Up close, he managed to see the dark figure for what it really was.

"I see... And here I thought I had moved beyond my past," the streetwalker said.

Naotsugu didn't know her past, nor what she saw the dark figure as. How could he? Only she knew what thoughts were kept in her mind.

"Some things are impossible to fully move beyond," Jinya said flatly. Naotsugu wondered if he spoke from experience. No emotion could be heard in his voice, but that only made him sound all the more sorrowful.

"Hey, Ronin, what did you see the dark figure as?" the streetwalker asked, only half-interested, as she kept her gaze where the dark figure had disappeared.

Jinya seemed stunned for a moment and just stood there, his expression as unreadable as ever. He made a soft, self-derisive smile. "Long ago, there was a man I couldn't land a single blow on. Every day, I'd swing a wooden sword at him only to be beaten easily... And yet, I cut him down today. That fact bothers me a little."

Naotsugu didn't know Jinya's past, so he couldn't understand how he felt. That was just how things were; no one could understand another completely.

"Is that right? I won't press you for details, then," the streetwalker said.

"Thank you."

“You’re very welcome. Unlike a certain someone, I’m not so crude as to go poking around in someone’s past.” She gave Naotsugu a cheeky side glance. He could only laugh dryly in response.

The three looked back up at the sky. The rain had stopped at some point, and a pale moon peeked between parting gray clouds. The stillness of night had returned.

“Well then...” The streetwalker stepped out from under the eaves while gazing up at the night sky.

“Leaving so soon?” Naotsugu asked.

“Yes. I don’t quite feel like working tonight, so I think I’ll go home and sleep.”

Naotsugu understood she was a streetwalker who had to sleep with men to survive, but that knowledge gave him a strange feeling he couldn’t quite describe. He couldn’t bring himself to say a word more to her as she left.

She smiled, seeing through his conflicted feelings. “Until next time, Ronin... and Naotsugu-sama.”

With some cheerful last words, she disappeared into the night.

After a series of coincidences, Naotsugu and the streetwalker began seeing one another. What happened beyond that point, however, was not known to Jinya.

Even if he were to learn of their fates or hear how their story ended, he would still not know the events that led up to it. Their love story was their own to know, and it could amount to nothing more than an interlude in the story of a demon hunter driven by his own hatred.

In the end, the story *Streetwalker in the Rain* began from a point unknown to him and ended at a point unknown to him. People can only see the world they see, after all.

“Miyaka-chan. Miyaka-chan!”

I felt shaking, as well as the tickle of someone whispering in my ear. I was comfortable, though, so I chose not to rouse.

“C’mon, the play’s already over!”

I awoke with a sudden start after a violent shake.

“Finally.”

“...Huh? Kaoru? Wait, did I fall asleep?”

“Yep. You were out like a light,” Kaoru replied with a big, fat smile. She must’ve been the one to give me that *really* big shake just now. Rude.

“But what about the play?”

“Already finished.”

“Ah. I see.”

I’d gone and done it now. I looked around and saw students leaving their seats and heading for the exit. I must’ve been just that zonked out not to notice the play ending.

“Shoot...” We were supposed to write a report on the play’s contents and our impressions of it. Having missed the majority of it, I had no clue what I was going to write.

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you out, seeing as you’re always helping me study.”

“...Thank you, Kaoru.”

For once, my youthful-looking friend seemed like a goddess to me.

After returning to school, we were given some self-study time to write our report on the play. The classroom was rather noisy, since with the teacher gone everyone in the class began chatting the second they finished writing. As for me, I was over by Kaoru’s desk struggling to write about the play I hadn’t seen.

“Do you think this is good enough?”

“Yeah, it should be fine.”

I let out a sigh of relief, having managed something passable. I spent the rest

of the self-study time doing the same thing as everyone else: chatting.

“But you really missed out, Miyaka-chan. The play was so good.”

Kaoru flashed an innocent smile. Streetwalker in the Rain must’ve really lined up with her interests. I wasn’t all that interested in it to begin with, so it didn’t feel like I’d missed out. I suppose it might’ve been cool to talk about the play afterwards though.

“You thought it was pretty good too, right?” she called out to a boy sitting nearby. She hadn’t really talked to many boys back in junior high, but there were a few she kinda talked to now that we were in high school. The one she talked to the most was this one, a boy with somewhat fierce-looking eyes who acted surprisingly subdued. He still wasn’t done writing his report, but he turned to look at Kaoru and responded anyway.

“Oh... Asaga...Azusaya.”

“Sheesh, don’t you think it’s about time you remembered my name?” she said a bit grumpily.

This boy was rather soft on Kaoru because she apparently resembled an old acquaintance of his. Because of that, he’d occasionally call her by the wrong name. I was admittedly more than a little curious about what this look-alike of Kaoru’s might be like.

“Sorry. It’s not that I don’t remember your name; it just...slips out, you know?”

“Do we really look that similar?”

“You do. She looked just like a heavenly maiden.”

“Jeez, not that again.”

What he meant by “heavenly maiden” was a complete mystery. I’d agree Kaoru looked better than average, but she was more the cutesy type than the heavenly-gorgeous type. But let’s put that aside. Kaoru and this boy were rather close, perhaps because they had neighboring seats. They chatted with surprising ease.

“Huh... Was the play really that good?” I doubted I’d get an answer if I asked

what he meant by “heavenly maiden,” so I brought up the play instead. Hearing them both talk it up kind of had me interested.

“It was, in its own way... I’m not too sure I like how useless they made Naotsugu’s ronin friend look, though,” the boy replied.

Come to think of it, his name was the same as Naotsugu’s friend in the story. He must not have liked how pathetic his namesake was. Seeing how childish he could be despite how calm and expressionless he always was felt a little relieving, a reminder that even he was just our age.

Kaoru said, “Ah, yeah... He tried all that to help them, and yet Naotsugu was the one who ended up killing the demon.”

“Right. You can feel the streetwalker’s disdain for the ronin in her memoirs.”

“Aha ha ha, I wouldn’t go that far. She loved Naotsugu, so she’s bound to be a little biased, you know?”

Kaoru laughed without a care in the world while the boy glumly crossed his arms. I was a bit surprised—I didn’t think he was the type to get so into a play.

“Ah, but that one part was nice,” Kaoru said, smiling broadly as she brought her hands together before her chest. “You know, the part where the men sparred at Naotsugu’s house.”

I was half-awake for that part, so I sort of remembered it. If I recalled correctly, the samurai and the ronin were sparring in a garden while the streetwalker—now the samurai’s wife—and the ronin’s daughter watched...or at least I think that was how it was. I was halfway asleep then, so I didn’t really remember much—definitely not enough to join in on the conversation.

“Ah...yeah.” He agreed with her, it seemed. He cast his gaze down as he remembered, and a soft smile rose to her face.

“What happened in that scene?” I asked, feeling a little too left out.

Kaoru gave me a peppy grin and answered, “The streetwalker figured out the ronin was actually a demon, but she pretended not to know for his sake.”

That rainy night so long ago, everybody could only see what they themselves saw, and so truths went by unnoticed.

But one mustn't forget. *Unseen* and *absent* are not one and the same. Even if one could not see the truth, it existed. And so long as it existed, it could one day be discovered. Small, tiny bits of kindness, initially gone unnoticed, to be found much later.

"That streetwalker really pulled a fast one on them... She didn't let on the fact she knew at all," he said with an emotional sigh.

That stirred a bit of interest in me—was it really *that* good a scene?

"Yeah, that actor was so good!" Kaoru chimed in.

I knew it was my fault for falling asleep, but I felt just a little sad I couldn't join in on their conversation. "...I wonder if they have the play on DVD?"

"Huh? Ah, right, 'cause you missed it halfway through. I dunno about DVD, but I hear it's in paperback."

Paperback, huh... I figured I'd try to find it in a bookstore sometime, then remembered our school library was pretty big and instead decided to try snagging a copy there. Thinking there was no time like the present, I told the two I was headed there now.

"I'll come with, if you don't mind; although I'd much rather find the streetwalker's memoir itself," the boy said.

"You're more interested in that, huh?" Kaoru said.

"Yeah, particularly what she thought of the ronin."

I thought that was surprisingly childish of him...or rather, was it just me, or did he have a grudge against the streetwalker?

That aside, he spoke with such a serious look that I couldn't help but laugh. Seeing that, Kaoru began to giggle. Our laughter only grew more intense as he stood there with the same ever-glum look on his face.

A May breeze blew just outside the classroom window, carrying the comforting scent of fresh greenery with it. It was a sunny, clear-skied day.

"Until next time, Ronin...and Naotsugu-sama."

Naotsugu stood there in a daze. The streetwalker finally called him by name. Part of him was hopeful this meant something more, and yet another part of him was fearful what she did was just a passing fancy of hers. Unable to make sense of things, he turned to Jinya for answers. "...How should I interpret this?"

"Good question. Maybe you have a chance?" Jinya gave a noncommittal answer. As though enjoying the ever-serious Naotsugu's rare fluster, he smiled.

"Y-you think so?"

"I do. That said..."

Maybe? No, it couldn't be... As Naotsugu wavered back and forth between the two possibilities, Jinya looked off in the direction the streetwalker had taken and sighed softly.

"...She really is a strange woman."

There was a limit to how much one person could know. While the day he discovered her kindness would eventually come, his impression of her would remain the same a little longer yet.

Drunken Dreams of Lingering Snow

1

EVEN NOW, the snowfall showed no sign of stopping.

It was now year three of the Ansei era (1856 AD), winter.

Flake by flake, snow piled up without a sound. Tonight was a night of lazy snowfall. The scattered blood seemed more crimson than usual.

After killing the final demon, caught in one of the dusty home's many rooms, Jinya swung the blood off his blade and slowly returned it to its scabbard. The demon was already turning into vapor. He silently watched it fade until nothing was left.

He could kill his own kind for money without a second thought now. He had grown used to the work and felt no hesitation or regret in his actions. In the past, he might have felt something as he killed, but he could no longer even remember what that was like.

Someone long ago said that nothing that exists is changeless. Jinya had wanted to become strong, to become someone who could kill without hesitation. But every time he killed a demon, his sword became more bloodied and his heart murkier. Maybe the human heart he hadn't fully abandoned was simply edging closer to that of a demon's at long last.

How pathetic, he thought with a sigh. Despite having wanted to wield his blade without wavering, he now lamented what he had become.

Still, he could not change the way of life he knew.

As though to suppress the emotions stirring inside him, he left the room and did not look back.

By midnight, the snowfall had grown stronger.

“Thank you for your help. It’s not much, but please, take this.”

Standing in the snow before the gate was a middle-aged man with conspicuous, gray-streaked hair. He had claimed to serve the estate Jinya had just exited. He handed over a neatly folded cloth, likely containing cheap sen coins. Jinya took the folded cloth and, after noting its lack of weight, politely stashed it away inside the folds of his clothes without checking the contents.

Most of the residents of this samurai estate, located west of Edo Castle, had suddenly gone missing a few days prior. In their place appeared a dozen or so demons. The middle-aged man was the only one to escape with his life. He came to Jinya after hearing a rumor that he hunted demons, then asked that he slay the fiends that killed his master.

“My master loved to drink while gazing out on nature’s beauty. I think I’ll make a grave for him and offer up his favorite sake,” the man said. His sad voice trembled with winter’s chill as a cold wind painfully brushed their cheeks. The man lightly knocked off the snow that had piled upon his shoulders, then stiffly bowed. “I shouldn’t keep you any longer. Once again, thank you for your help.” With cloudy skies above, he began to walk away.

Jinya wondered what the man would do now. He was about to ask, then reconsidered. The man had lost everything. What fate lay ahead of him now was something nobody—not even the man himself—knew. Therefore, it was pointless to ask.

Jinya stared at the now-empty estate. Doomed to fall to ruins, it appeared terribly pitiful.

Before long, the middle-aged man disappeared, leaving Jinya alone with nothing but the grayness of the snow surrounding him. He then departed into the night as well; sound and smell all snuffed out by stillness.

Tired from the previous night, he awoke to find beams of light entering his room from the high noon sun.

Jinya lived in a cheap rowhouse on the outskirts of Fukagawa. The sounds of others going about their lives could be easily heard through the building’s thin

walls. It was by no means a nice place to live, but he only ever returned here to sleep, so it would do as long as it had a roof to provide cover from the elements.

To hide his lack of aging, he had already changed residences numerous times since coming to Edo. He had been at this particular rowhouse for a while now, so he figured it was high time he found a new place.

He left his cozy room and made for Kihee, but a jovial laugh stopped him momentarily.

“Drinking already, Dad?”

“Ha ha, why not? Gotta make use of this time off somehow. C’mere and join me.”

He overheard the neighboring father-daughter pair. The father was apparently already hitting the bottle at midday. The daughter’s admonishing tone was gentle, their closeness evident by their voices alone.

Even though he was a complete outsider, Jinya felt comforted by their happiness. The cold of winter became just a little more bearable.

“It’s grown rather cold, hasn’t it?” The previous night’s snow had cleanly melted away, but the wintry air was still cold enough to raise goosebumps. Ofuu breathed out a cloud of white vapor and rubbed her numb digits together, the sight of her further driving home the fact that winter was, indeed, here. “Um, thank you for helping me, by the way.”

Jinya had bumped into Ofuu on her way back from some shopping and now held her things for her: a ceramic bottle of sake in each of his hands and a bundle of vegetables like cabbage under his right arm, each set of items wrapped in cloth. Ofuu, empty-handed, looked a bit apologetic.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind,” he replied. He had been heading to Kihee to help Ofuu out anyway. She was busy with preparations for a celebration tonight, so he volunteered himself as help.

“Is it heavy?” she asked.

“Hardly.”

“Are you sure?”

Though he looked human, he was a demon; something like this hardly weighed a thing to him. She should know that, but then again, it was just like her to make sure anyway.

“Don’t worry, I don’t mind helping. I’m looking forward to the celebration tonight.” He couldn’t do much to help with preparations, but it felt good to do what he could.

“Oh...?” She looked at him with surprise, finding that unusual for him. He bashfully cleared his throat, causing her to smile gently. “I see.” She said nothing further, an act of kindness on her part. She looked at him as though seeing a chick take flight from its nest for the first time.

He felt a bit awkward under her gaze, so he said, “Was this all?”

“Yes, we only needed alcohol and ingredients.”

“Shall we head back then?”

“Let’s.”

The two of them always found themselves walking slower than usual when together. Occasionally, they’d spot a flower by the roadside and stop to talk about what kind of flower it was and what tales it was associated with. It was winter now, so there were not many flowers to be found, but the two walked slowly together by sheer habit. This was comfortable for him. He had learned to relax enough to let himself breathe.

“Oh, what’s going on?” Seeing a crowd in the street, Ofuu spoke up. “Wow, that’s quite the crowd.”

From a quick glance, Jinya saw both commoners and samurai, men and women alike, gathered. They crowded before a liquor store without making lines, waiting impatiently for the store to open. This wasn’t the first time he’d walked past the liquor store, but he had never seen it this busy before. He watched for a moment, curious, when a thin man emerged—likely the store’s owner. The crowd began to calm somewhat with his appearance.

“Thank you for waiting, everyone! I am proud to announce Snow’s Memory is now back in stock!” Despite the man’s thinness, his voice carried well.

The crowd grew noisy, with cheers that reached a feverish pitch. *They must be selling quite the choice liquor*, Jinya figured.

The thin man’s voice, heavy with pride, was buoyed by the crowd’s elation. “One gulp of this will captivate your heart, one decanter’s worth will ascend your soul, and a single bottle will leave you beyond the point of no return... That’s our claim to fame, at least! Please, enjoy Snow’s Memory to the fullest!”

With the intensity of an avalanche, the crowd began to pour into the liquor store. In all their excitement, they lost sight of themselves and began to practically climb over each other for the famed liquor.

“Three bottles! I need three bottles over here!”

“No, over here first!”

They shoved to be the first ones served, sen coins clutched in hand. The crowd kicked up a cloud of dust in all the commotion, and many angry shouts and quarreling could be heard from within the noise.

Ofuu looked at the feverish throng in a daze. “That drink must be *really* popular.”

Snow’s Memory... Jinya hadn’t heard of the liquor before, but it must be rather popular for such a crowd to form. He enjoyed alcohol a fair bit and was more than a little interested in seeing what the craze was all about.

She suggested, “We’re already here; should we try buying some?”

“No, I think I’d rather not. My interest is piqued, but...we have this already.” His hands were full as it was—he wouldn’t be able to hold any more. Being a demon, he could easily carry as much as a hefty bundle of rice or two on one shoulder if he wanted, but he had no reason to display his inhuman strength so openly.

“I suppose you’re right,” she said. “There’s no need to buy any more alcohol.”

He *did* want to try the liquor, but not if it meant sticking his neck in that mess of a crowd. Only slightly curious as to what he could be missing, the two

resumed walking again. They had preparations to get to that would keep them busy until nighttime.

“Heya, how’re things going?”

Sunset came early in winter. Day and night had already switched places by the time a single, measly koku⁴ had passed. It was dark outside, and the air was colder. Still trembling from the chill, Zenji ducked under Kihee’s entrance curtains carrying something wrapped in cloth. Jinya and Natsu were already inside, and the restaurant owner was back in the kitchen hard at work.

“You’re late,” Natsu said.

“Sorry, work got a little busy.” Zenji grinned. He seemed in a good mood despite having been busy, and the reason why was no mystery at all.

Natsu was kinder to him than usual as she, too, had been looking forward to this day. “I guess I can let it slide then, seeing as today’s your special day. We’re only waiting on Miura-sama now.”

As soon as she said that, the entrance curtains fluttered. A stern-looking samurai wearing a fresh, unwrinkled kimono robe walked in. He was one of Kihee’s few regulars, Miura Sadanaga.

“Oh, Naotsugu!”

“Good to see you, Zenji-dono. Sorry I’m late.”

“Not at all, and thanks for coming.”

Despite being of different social classes, samurai and merchant respectively, the two were on very friendly terms.

With Naotsugu here, all the usual faces were gathered, and just in time too, as the preparations had just finished.

“It looks like we’re all here. Whenever you’re ready, Zenji,” Ofuu said.

All eyes fixed on Zenji. He was the star of today’s celebration, the reason for which all the alcohol and ingredients were bought. The Kihee regulars were gathered to congratulate him.

“Oh, um, thank you all for gathering here today. It’s hard to believe that it’s already been so many years since I came to work at Sugaya, but—”

“Just get to the point,” Natsu said.

“Rude. But I guess it isn’t like me to be so stiff and formal, huh?” He cleared his throat, then scratched his head, nervous even with only familiar faces around. After a pause, he smiled and continued with, “I, Zenji, have been promoted to manager of Sugaya. For hosting this celebration in my honor, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart!”

His words were still a little stiff, but his eyes were moist with happiness. Being manager meant that he not only handled business for the store but also managed the store’s affairs as a whole. What was more, being manager was the highest position an employee could have, meaning he had risen to the top of the chain. Zenji had worked hard in the more than fifteen years he’d spent at Sugaya, and his efforts were now being rewarded. Everyone knew just how hard he had labored and were proud for him.

“Congratulations, Zenji-san,” Ofuu said with a smile.

“Aha ha, thank you, Ofuu-san.”

“Congratulations. Make sure to support Jyuuzou-dono well,” Jinya said.

“Oh yeah, leave him to me! I’ll make Sugaya bigger than ever before!”

Naotsugu and Natsu also congratulated him. After things calmed down some, the restaurant owner came out from the kitchen with a large earthenware pot. He placed it on a table and said, “Thanks for waiting, everyone. Go on ahead and eat up.”

The contents of the pot were bubbling hot. It contained a soup stock made from a mixture of dashi and shoyu, cabbage, green onions, other assorted vegetables, and a hefty portion of shamo chicken meat.

“Whoa, shamo hotpot!” Zenji exclaimed.

“I figured today was a little too special for something like soba, so I splurged a bit. I can’t guarantee how well it turned out, but I hope you like it.”

“Oh, Mister... You’re too kind.” The surprise feast made Zenji a little

emotional.

Ofuu then brought out a few sake decanters. “We have some of these as well. Here.” She passed out sake cups, then poured warm liquor for everyone.

Zenji’s eyes went wide upon seeing the clarity of the fluid. “Isn’t this Kamigata sake? Where’d you get your hands on something like this?”

Brewing techniques weren’t all that advanced in the Edo area, so most of its sake was cloudy and unrefined. That’s why good, clear sake had to be imported from Kamigata—the colloquial name for Kyoto and its vicinity. Kamigata sake was a luxury the average man could rarely enjoy, so it was hard to imagine an unpopular restaurant like Kihee could afford it.

“Jinya-kun brought it for us,” Ofuu answered.

“...I figured a celebration called for good drink,” Jinya said. Stone-faced, he sipped his sake. He avoided meeting Zenji’s gaze, likely out of bashfulness. Everyone noticed, making them smile.

“Aw, that’s so sweet I could cry,” Zenji said. “Thank you. All right, everyone, let’s get to it before things get cold!”

They ate from the hotpot and drank liquor as they enjoyed their small party. Despite being a soba chef, the restaurant owner had whipped up a fairly good shamo chicken hotpot that everyone gladly stuffed their cheeks with. The three younger men drank more than they ate and went through the decanters at a fairly rapid rate.

“Ahh, that’s good stuff,” Zenji said. “You picked out a nice one, Jinya, but I guess I should’ve expected such from the strongest lush I know.”

“For your sake, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It *was* a compliment!”

Jinya had known Zenji long enough to know he meant well, even if he didn’t always pick the best words. He let slide the fact he had been called a drunkard and gulped down the contents of his cup again. The warm liquor gliding down his throat felt good. It had been a while since he’d enjoyed the taste of liquor.

“Are you girls not going to drink?” Zenji asked.

“I’m good.”

“I’ll have to decline as well. Oh, let me pour you another.”

The two girls weren’t fond of alcohol and stuck with hotpot and tea instead. Not about to let the man of the moment pour his own drink, Ofuu poured Zenji a cup.

“Ah, thank you,” he said. “How about you, Mister?”

“I’ll pass; I can’t drink like I used to at my age.”

“What are you saying? You’re still so young. ...Oh, I almost forgot.” Right when the party was at full swing, Zenji picked up the cloth-wrapped item he had set aside. He placed it on the table with a thud, prompting a curious look from Natsu.

“What’s that?”

“Aha ha, well, I actually brought some sake along too, but forgot.” He undid the wrapping and pulled out two ceramic bottles, each around a sizable five gou.⁵ By appearance alone, it seemed to be quite the pricey liquor. With all eyes gathered on the bottles, he hummed a tune and undid their seals. “This sake has been quite the buzz around town lately. Jyuuzou-sama’s been downing it every night, so I got curious and bought some myself. I thought it might be nice if we all tried it together.”

“Is that Snow’s Memory?”

“Oh, you’re familiar with it?”

Jinya had only just learned of it that day, but his interest was piqued after witnessing the fanatic enthusiasm for it. He had even higher hopes for its taste now that he heard the owner of an affluent business was drinking it nightly.

“Jyuuzou-sama told me it’s best to drink it cold. Excuse me, Ofuu-san, could we have some cups?”

“Right away.” Ofuu scurried to the back of the restaurant and brought out three sake cups wider than the ones used earlier.

Zenji reached for a bottle, eager to taste the famous liquor, but his hand only touched air. “Huh? M-Miss Natsu?”

Natsu had grabbed the bottle first and was slowly pouring it for him. This was a first for Zenji; as she was his boss's daughter, there was never a situation that called for her to pour for him. Flummoxed, he looked up at her.

"Just this once." Though she looked a bit bashful, she didn't turn away with a huff and instead softly smiled.

His eyes moistened. He felt extra emotional since he'd known her since she was small. "Oh, to think the day Miss Natsu would pour me a drink has come. Live long enough and the darndest things will happen, huh?"

"You're not that old, though."

"It's not about my age, it's about the feeling. Man... To think that snotty brat's all grown up...has me choking up a little."

"...I'll overlook that slip of the tongue for tonight."

"Oh. Sorry."

While the little girl had indeed grown, the power balance between the two hadn't shifted at all. But neither minded. After their exchange, they could still both smile at one another.

His cup was now filled to the brim. Lovingly, he put it to his lips and took a big gulp, then vigorously spat it back out.

"Wha—*gross!* What are you doing?!" Natsu said sharply, insulted to have the cup she poured for him spat out.

He paid her no mind, however, and painfully cleared his throat. "Wh—*koff*, what the hell? This thing's not fit for human consumption!"

It was supposedly popular in town and a favorite of Jyuuzou's, but it seemed Zenji could not even stand its taste enough to swallow it.

Curious, Naotsugu poured himself a cup and drank a small sip. "Nh, gah..." His opinion seemed to match Zenji's as he squinted his eyes in pain. "It's strong. Not enough to make me spit it out, but it's certainly not palatable." He grimaced and put the cup down on the table a little strongly. He got through his first cup somehow, but he made no move to pour another. Displeasure was clear in his face and tone, something rare for him. "How could you bring this

swill?”

Zenji flinched upon hearing Naotsugu speak harshly for once. “H-hey, I didn’t know it’d be this bad! Here, you try it too, Jinya.”

A cup was forced onto Jinya. The two of them seemed to find it awful, but then what was with that fervor he saw at midday? It couldn’t be that bad, surely? To make certain, he took a sip.

“Hm...” It wasn’t harsh; in fact, it hardly tasted like anything. He didn’t feel any warm burn as it went down his throat either. He recalled the watered-down sake he often drank with Mosuke, the demon with the power of *Invisibility*. This was even weaker than that. It had a faint scent, but it was practically water, alcohol-wise. Its flavor wasn’t bad, though. It was a somehow nostalgic, rustic drink. “It’s not bad. It is weak, though.”

“...This is weak for you? No way. You can’t be *that* strong of a lush,” Zenji said.

Jinya received cold, unbelieving looks from the two men. He was a stronger drinker than the other two, but his sense of taste shouldn’t have been that different. He couldn’t believe the two found such a weak liquor undrinkable.

“Ah, um, Ofuu-san, would you like to try?” Zenji offered.

“U-um, I don’t really drink, so no thank you.”

“Don’t offer someone something you yourself spat out,” Natsu chided.

“Actually, is that even the same sake as the one that’s popular?”

“It is; I made sure. It’s definitely the one Jyuuzou-sama’s praising every night,” Zenji replied. With his expensive alcohol turning out to be a dud and the merry mood of the party now gone, he sadly groaned. “Ugh, it feels like I really spoiled things right at the last moment.”

“You can say that again. Good grief.”

“Naotsugu, please, I didn’t know! Aww. I guess I’ll give the rest to Jyuuzou-sama. What a waste of money...” He slumped. Just like that, their fun celebration ended with a depressive mood. Nobody said a word as everyone began packing up.

Jinya took another sip of his leftover Snow’s Memory. “It really is weak,

though...”

It didn’t taste particularly good, but it had a nostalgic, familiar flavor.

2

THE NEXT DAY, around the time twilight changed to night, Jinya left the rowhouse.

“Aren’t you drinking a little too much, Dad?”

“Oh, be quiet. This much won’t kill me.”

He overheard the neighboring father-daughter pair again. The father was hitting the bottle as usual. His daughter chided him, but he just brushed her off.

The drunker one was, the more one drank. Alcohol could be enjoyable, but drink too much and one lost all sense of self-restraint, leading to a vicious cycle of stupor.

Jinya walked past as the family continued to quarrel, then walked along the still busy main street until he reached Yanagibashi Bridge, which spanned the point where the Kanda River fed into the Sumida River. He squinted as he saw someone standing in the middle of the bridge. They saw him as well and listlessly smiled.

“Hello, Ronin.” The woman who was simply known as “Streetwalker” still continued to work as a streetwalker to this day. Naotsugu wasn’t too pleased about that, but what could he do? Jinya frequently met her to buy information, but her personal affairs were none of his business. The fact that he tended to be rather charitable with her pay was just a coincidence. “Tonight’s rather cold, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m looking for work. Do you have anything?” he said, cutting to the point.

“A little small talk isn’t going to hurt you, you know?” She sighed. Her pale skin looked even more pale with the cold.

“Ah. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. But, yes, I do have a number of things I’m sure you’d love to hear.”

She smiled softly. Not the smile she would use to tempt men, but one a person might use with a child. That was to say, her smile had grown more relaxed.

Jinya didn't know what had brought on this change. He understood it might have been because of her interactions with Naotsugu, but that was all. He wasn't the sort to shamelessly inquire into others' relationships, so he asked nothing. In the end, the streetwalker remained nothing more than a strange woman to him.

She said, "There have been many demon rumors as of late. A sickly son was sleeping when suddenly a demon appeared in his place. A number of demons have gathered to lurk under a bridge. There is even a sword that speaks. What else... Ah, right. There's a beautiful demoness with blonde hair who stalks the night. These rumors are all sourced from pillow talk, of course, so I can't guarantee they're reliable. But it's still a worrying number of rumors, don't you think?"

Jinya agreed. Lately there had been too many demons around. Just the other day, for instance, he had found more than ten demons at the samurai estate—something that rarely happened.

She continued, "But perhaps there's just that much unease going around. I'm sure you've heard the news—about Uruga, that is."

"I have."

She was referring to the incident that took place three years ago, in year six of the Kaei era (1853 AD). An American by the name of Matthew Perry forcibly docked four black ships in Uruga Port. The steamships in the fleet shocked the commoners of Edo, as they revealed how much power foreign nations had developed over the years. What was more, a diplomatic message from the president of the United States of America was delivered to the shogunate, which directly led to the forcible formation of the Kanagawa Treaty the following year. The country's long-held stance of isolating itself from the world was easily broken, and the shogunate looked helpless to its people.

"People can't help but worry when the ones running the show aren't in control..." she said.

"...And when people worry, demons run rampant," he finished. If demons

lived in the recesses of people's hearts, then the current rampage of demons in Edo reflected how vulnerable the people felt.

"Exactly. All I've been hearing as of late has either been worries about the shogunate, rumors of demons, or talk of alcohol."

"Alcohol?"

"Yeah. There's been a popular one lately, apparently. It's pricey; a man I was with bragged about buying it. I believe it was called Snow's Memory."

He raised an eyebrow. There it was again, Snow's Memory, the liquor that had caused a stir around town. He found it hard to believe it could be so popular after tasting it himself, but the people of Edo seemed to love it regardless. How very strange. He asked, "Did they say anything about its flavor?"

"Not exactly, but they did say it was sublime, enough to ascend them to heaven."

That weak liquor, sublime? he thought doubtfully. He was about to say something, then remembered: Only he found the liquor weak. Zenji found it too harsh to drink, and Naotsugu remarked it was unpalatable. But Jyuuzou lapped it down every night, and now the streetwalker knew someone who had called it sublime.

Something wasn't right. Tastes differed between people, but not to this extent. It was almost as though Snow's Memory tasted differently to those who drank it.

"Streetwalker, I have a request. Look into this Snow's Memory alongside your usual demon-rumor gathering. I'm particularly interested in knowing if people found its taste good or bad, where it's sold, and where it's made in the first place. But I'll take any info you can find at all."

"You think something's going on?"

Such a rustic, nostalgic, and terribly weak drink had to have something going on to be this popular. "Maybe. Hopefully it's just nothing."

"Fair enough. I'll look into it, since you've been so good to me."

“Thank you. Don’t do anything reckless, though. Naotsugu would never forgive me if something happened to you.”

“Ha ha, so even you can tell a joke, huh?” She laughed, despite Jinya being serious. From the soft look in her eyes, she didn’t mind his comment. “Oh. No wonder it was so cold.”

Flakes began to drift down from the dark sky—snow fluttering like flower petals, landing without a sound.

“Snow, huh,” Jinya remarked.

“Winter is fully here, it seems. Oh, we were talking about demons. Shall we pick up where we left off?”

His attention was elsewhere. Fighting while he felt this conflicted was a bad idea. He shook his head.

“I see. I’ll be going then. Later, Ronin.” The streetwalker bid him a quick farewell and faded into the night.

He was all alone now. He stood still in darkness absent of even smell, and found his gaze naturally drawn to the sky.

Even now, the snowfall showed no sign of stopping.

His shoulders shivered slightly as a cold breeze blew.

Many days later, Jinya was about to set out for the day when a sudden visitor appeared. He was taken aback to see who it was. “...Natsu?”

This was the first time she’d ever been to his place, and the suddenness of her arrival brought his thoughts to a standstill. A well-heeled girl like her was out of place in a squalid rowhouse like this. She gawked as she peeked into his room, dull as it was—it was, for him, not a place to live in but one to sleep in, after all. She quickly lost interest, however, and said, “Morning! Well, it’s noon already, but you know what I mean.”

“Uh, sure. How’d you know where I live?”

“Ofuu-san told me. This is...quite the place you live in.” The rowhouse wasn’t

located too far from Kihee. She gave him a look, as though taking issue with the fact that he hadn't told her where he lived himself.

"Dad, you've had enough!"

"Shut it! Just hurry up and go buy me more liquor!"

Natsu flinched at the sudden shouting. It wasn't unusual to be awoken by the sound of other residents in a rowhouse, but a well-to-do girl like her had never had to deal with such immediate neighbors. "Wh-what's going on?"

"It's just the neighboring family. The father must be day-drinking again." This was the usual fare for Jinya—although he could swear the neighbors' usual arguing wasn't this intense. The shouting match continued, causing Natsu to cower slightly. "What brings you here then?" he said. "I take it you're not just visiting out of curiosity?"

"O-of course not," she replied, returning to her senses. "There's something I need your help with." She looked to the side uncomfortably.

The helpless look in her eyes reminded him of her younger self. He let her into his room so they could talk at length. She kept her head hung low and didn't meet his gaze as she explained what was going on.

"...Zenji? Really?" he said.

"Really. He's been walking around with a bottle in hand and hasn't worked as of late. Even today, he's holed up in a bar at Nihonbashi."

Zenji was made manager only a few days ago, but he hadn't worked since then and instead drank the nights—and sometimes days—away. It was only a matter of time before Jyuuzou, the owner of Sugaya, stepped in and punished him, so Natsu wanted to do something before things came to that.

"Got it. But why did you come to me?" Jinya asked.

"Well, I'm a girl, so I'm a bit hesitant about going into a bar alone. But I figured if you were my bodyguard, even a couple hundred thugs would be no problem." Many lowlifes spent their daylight hours drinking at bars, so she wanted someone she could trust to protect her. "Please? I'll pay you if needed." She lowered her head. He could see her shoulders trembling slightly with worry

for Zenji.

Jinya's only motivation was to grow stronger. By that logic, he had no reason to accept her request. That said, he wasn't so coldhearted as to ignore her heartfelt plea for help. With a nod, he said, "I don't need your money. Show me the way." This was the least he could do for such a longtime acquaintance.

"...Thank you." She gave him a genuine smile. He would accept that in place of payment.

Slowly, he stood. He hadn't taken her request purely out of the goodness of his heart, however—the mention of alcohol had caught his attention.

They visited a fairly spacious bar in Nihonbashi with almost twenty customers inside despite it being midday. The air was teeming with the stench of alcohol, making Natsu grimace. She covered her nose as she looked around the place, then found Zenji and went farther in, toward the back.

"Ohh, Miss Natsu, welcome, welcome! What brings you here?" Zenji loudly called out to them, his words slurred. He unashamedly downed a cup of liquor. He must've been at it for a while, as his table was full of empty decanters and bottles. The name was written on the side of the bottle: Snow's Memory.

"I'm here for you, of course!" Natsu said. "Just what do you think you're doing, skipping work to come here and drink?"

"Oh, shut up! Quit your yapping. What are you, a dog?"

"Wha..." She was speechless. She knew Zenji better than anyone and found it unthinkable that he would ever say something so mean.

"It's 'cause you're like that that you can't get married, Miss Natsu. Ah, that and the fact that no man would ever want a girl with an awful personality like yours."

Her shoulders trembled with rage, or perhaps sadness. He paid her no mind and downed another cup. He seemed to relish the drink, despite having said it was too strong for him just a few days ago.

"Zenji, what's with you?" she said.

“Hm? Oh, you’re still here. What a downer. Just leave already.”

He’d come to Sugaya when she was only four and, with how amicable and easy to talk to he was, he became like an older brother to her. Faced with his cruel words in the present, she was stunned beyond response.

Annoyed by how she just stood there in a daze, Zenji opened his mouth to say something, but Jinya had seen enough and interrupted him. “Leave it at that.”

Zenji scowled. His eyes clouded with an emotion Jinya knew all too well. “Who the hell are you to get in my way?”

“You’ve gone too far. There’s a limit to how much your drunkenness can excuse.”

“Ha! So, the ronin wants to feel a little righteous today, huh? You know, I never did like your guts, you.” Zenji sluggishly stood and glared, his visage much like a demon mask in a noh play. This was no drunken mistake. There was true hatred for Jinya in him.

“Zenji, stop it!” Natsu quickly snapped back to her senses and spoke up, but Zenji didn’t seem to hear her words. He reached for an empty bottle of Snow’s Memory, the look in his eyes growing ever fiercer—murderous even.

“You’re drunk.” Jinya was unfazed by the malice directed his way. Having fought demons more times than he cared to count, he was unbothered by something like this. He let out an exasperated sigh, which seemed to anger Zenji.

“You think you’re better than me, huh?!” Thinking he was being mocked, Zenji swung the bottle at Jinya.

But he was too slow. Jinya simply dodged sideways as Zenji recklessly attacked, then took a step forward and slammed him in the abdomen with an open-palm strike.

“Guh...”

Jinya had held back, of course, but the blow was still too much for Zenji’s untrained body to withstand. He fell to his knees, then onto the floor, and began to vomit a large quantity of alcohol as his body convulsed.

“Alcohol is a gift from the heavens. To abuse it to the point of violence, however, is an affront. Throw up as much as you can, for your own sake,” Jinya said. Zenji could no longer hear his words, however, as he was on the floor, unconscious and twitching...

Natsu could tell Zenji was not in mortal danger as he still breathed, but she was still left frantic by the abruptness of the events. “Hey! Don’t you think you went too far?”

“Not at all. It’s best that he vomits out all that liquor.”

“What?” Her worry was warranted, given that someone close to her was just punched, but Jinya felt he’d done the right thing. Snow’s Memory was just too strange a brew.

“Hey, what d’ya think you’re trying to pull here, huh?”

“You’ve got guts, messing with us!”

Hearing the disturbance, the men drinking in the bar got up one after another and surrounded Natsu and Jinya. It was unlikely they had been friendly with Zenji, but they seemed out for blood, regardless.

Natsu hid behind Jinya in fear. “Wh-wh-what’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t look like they’re mad that their drinking buddy got punched.”

Their eyes were like Zenji’s had been: bloodshot and full of malice. They all held their bottles in hand, and one even had a knife pulled from somewhere. They weren’t looking for a fight. They were looking to *kill*.

Jinya looked at the bottles left on the tables. They were all the same. Everyone here had been drinking Snow’s Memory. With this, he was finally certain—that was no ordinary liquor.

“J-Jinya...”

“Close your eyes. It’ll all be over soon.”

He didn’t draw his sword. He had no intention of killing anyone, but an injury or a two would be unavoidable. They attacked with vigor, but they were all amateurs, lacking both speed and technique. Jinya closed the distance to one

man with one step and punched him in the jaw with his right hand. Pushing off his right leg, he struck a second man with a knife-hand strike, then rammed a third in the vitals with his body. In the blink of an eye, three had been downed.

He continued to kick, punch, and use his body weight. The men dropped like flies, but one after another they continued to attack him. Even with the difference in strength made so clear, they showed no hesitation. Their will didn't come from bravery or foolhardiness, but what seemed to be madness.

"I'll kill you, you bastard!"

A number of men began throwing decanters and plates. Being hit by such things wouldn't leave even a mark on Jinya's demon body, but the same could not be said for Natsu. He stood before her to protect her and reached for Yarai so he could knock aside all the projectiles, but he froze before he could draw the blade.

"Go, paper swallow."

A swallow suddenly appeared and deflected all the items midair. Jinya moved his hand from his sword and dashed forward, closing the distance to the men and subduing them before they could grab their next items to throw.

In no time at all, all twenty-one men were down. The bar was finally quiet again.

"Zenji, are you all right?"

Zenji's consciousness still hadn't returned. Worried for him even after all the things he said, Natsu squeezed his hand.

"He's breathing. He'll be fine," Jinya said. Zenji had no visible wounds and was in no mortal danger, just unconscious. He had vomited all the alcohol he'd drunk as well. He would surely wake on his own in due time, hopefully back to his usual self now that the alcohol was out of him.

"...Right. Thank you." Natsu didn't let go of Zenji's hand, but she looked relieved and thanked Jinya regardless. "You're really something though, huh?" Flummoxed, she looked around at scores of men collapsed around the bar, then at Jinya, who wasn't even out of breath.

Truth be told, though, he hadn't fought alone. "I had some help."

A voice from behind Natsu said, "I get the feeling ya might not have needed it, though."

They looked to the bar's entrance and saw a man in his late twenties wearing a silk garment. If Jinya remembered correctly, Natsu had met him before as well.

"You saved me some trouble regardless. Thank you."

"Aha ha, you're as unflappable as ever, I see." He wore a plastered-on, insincere smile. He was younger back when they last met, but he gave off the same impression as ever: aloof, confident, and shady.

"It's been a while."

"That it has. Have you been well?"

It was the artifact spirit user Jinya met years ago: Akitsu Somegorou the Third.

3

"UGH... Hm?"

Zenji awoke to a throbbing pain in his abdomen. A wave of nausea washed over him, but there was nothing left to throw up, so he groaned instead. His surroundings slowly came into focus. He recognized where he was: It was Sugaya, specifically the communal room for apprentices.

"Why am I here...?"

The sky outside was already turning orange. The rays of light coming in through the window bathed the room in red and made it look a bit melancholic. He was alone in the room.

Just why had he been sleeping here, he wondered. Trying to recount the events he remembered, he counted off with his fingers and thought out loud. "I remember I was drinking..."

He had basically drowned himself in liquor at a bar in Nihonbashi. He lapped

up more and more of that soul-ascending drink until eventually his mind went hazy, and then...

“Ah...”

He said some things he shouldn't have to Natsu, who came to him out of worry. He then attacked his friend and lost consciousness after being struck in return.

All his terrible deeds came back to him. How pathetic. How shameful. He gritted his teeth in anger at himself.

“Oh, Zenji. You're awake?” One of the people he had hurt with his words appeared: the bratty girl he considered to be a little sister.

“M-Miss Natsu!” He sat up in surprise, but a throb of pain coursed through him after the sudden movement. “Agh...!”

“Don't push yourself.” She entered the room, acting no different than usual—at least from what he could tell. She sat by his side. “Does it still hurt?”

He had said such awful things to her, so why did she show him so much care still? He was confused, unable to read her heart. “O-oh, yes. A little bit.”

“He could've held back a little more, jeez.”

“He *did* once say he was bad at holding back...”

“Oh yeah, he did, didn't he? He can be so inflexible at times.” She laughed, leaving Zenji even more confused. He remembered everything that happened at the bar quite clearly. He had said hurtful things to her and felt joy in his heart at seeing her so stunned. The fact that he remembered how good it felt made him feel all the more ashamed.

“...I'm sorry.” It would've been easier if she'd just lashed out at him. But she didn't even bring up the subject, so he apologized instead. “I'm really, really sorry.” He wanted to give a more tasteful apology than that, but the only words that came to him were clumsy and crude.

“It's fine. You don't need to apologize for anything, really,” she said calmly. She put her hand against his cheek and smiled like one might to soothe a child.

“But I said such terrible things to you.”

“Perhaps. But there’s more to me than what you said. You said so yourself, remember?”

He did remember. When she was still young, a hideous demon manifested from her feelings. She cried and cowered before it, unable to face the fact that such unseemly emotions dwelled in her. That was when Zenji told her there was more to her than what the demon represented. She could be selfish and abrasive, but she could also be kind, and she loved her father dearly. All those things together made up who she was. That lesson he taught her stayed with her all these years, and now it returned to him.

“Of course, I was a little hurt,” she continued. “But I know that even if you meant what you said, you still care for me. Those things can both be true.”

“Miss Natsu...”

“So don’t fret over it. I’m not so childish that I’d care what a drunk says.”

He felt like he was seeing a baby bird leave its nest. That helpless, bratty child was now mature enough to comfort someone else. He felt deeply moved, but also a little sad; however, the warmth he felt from her overwhelmed it all. He said, “Still, I apologize. I wasn’t my proper self then.”

“You can say that again. You *did* try to attack us.”

“Ah...”

It had been such a strong liquor, but as he drank he grew accustomed to it until, eventually, he found it to be sublime. No matter how much he drank, it was never enough—the only thing he could do was mindlessly drink more and more. It had put him in such a pleasant mood, but he was oddly irritated when talking to Natsu. He found her annoying, loathing her to the point of finding actual joy in hurting her emotionally.

What he felt when Jinya spoke up, however, couldn’t be cast as mere annoyance. He felt unmistakable malice—to a degree that couldn’t be blamed on the alcohol. He loathed Jinya to the point of wanting him dead. Why that was, however, he did not know himself.

“You’re awake.”

A solemn voice interrupted his thoughts. It was likely the man he least wanted to meet at this moment. With trepidation, he looked up and confirmed who it was.

“Zenji. I heard you disgraced yourself.” It was Jyuuzou, the owner of Sugaya. He was always a stone-faced individual, but he seemed even more imposing today.

“J-Jyuuzou-sama...” Zenji felt frozen in place. His boss’s cold gaze was full of disgust toward him. Zenji’s mouth felt dry. His throat hurt. Goosebumps rose on his skin, and not because of winter’s chill. He swallowed, even though his mouth was too dry to wet his throat, and nervously awaited Jyuuzou’s next words as the silence between them seemed to stretch on forever.

“There won’t be a next time,” Jyuuzou coldly grumbled, as though sentencing a man to torture. His words were a declaration, not a warning. Without saying another word, he turned to leave. He was visibly angry, enough to make Zenji’s stomach turn.

Zenji knew he was only reaping what he sowed, but he still felt ashamed of himself, nonetheless. “Ah... What do I do?”

“I don’t think you can do anything but work your hardest from now on, right?”

“That’s a given, yes, but is that really all?” After finally being made manager, he went and screwed things up. With how stern Jyuuzou was, he could very well make Zenji start from zero as an apprentice if he didn’t redeem himself somehow.

“Either way, one thing is for certain: You’re abstaining from alcohol for a while,” she said with a grin.

“Ha, I’m fine with that.”

Her smile warmed his heart again. How lucky he was. Even after his drunken foolishness, he hadn’t lost her smile.

“Dad, you’ve already drunk everything we have!”

“Oh, shut it! Go fetch me some more then!”

Night came, but the father-daughter pair next door still continued to argue. This was nothing unusual for them, but lately their exchanges seemed more intense than usual—the daughter now in tears as her father drank.

“They’re really going at it over there, huh?”

Akitsu Somegorou sat before Jinya. He had his usual insincere smile plastered on, his inner workings as unreadable as ever. Though it was generally customary to offer guests tea, Jinya served the man nothing. They were simply not on such friendly terms.

When asked, Somegorou claimed to hail from Kyoto. He usually worked as a netsuke sculpture craftsman but slew demons as a user of artifact spirits when appropriate. He was a demon hunter like Jinya, but he went about it differently. For Jinya, hunting demons was of first priority, but for Somegorou, being a craftsman was more important. They were similar, yet distinctly different. What was more, one of them was a demon and the other a human—so even as they sat together now, they could not do so as peers.

“I heard the rumors. You’re the Yasha that hunts demons, aren’t ya? You’ve made a name for yourself,” Somegorou said teasingly. People loved to talk about rumors, and a common one that went around was that of the Yasha guardian that hunted Edo’s demons. It was no big surprise that the rumors had reached Somegorou as well.

“I suppose I’m somewhat known around here,” Jinya said with disinterest. Somegorou didn’t seem bothered by the evasive answer. It was a little amusing to hear of a demon that hunted demons, but neither of them cared enough to explore that topic. All they cared about was the case the other was currently working on, and nothing more. They weren’t here to chitchat but to get information off one another. Jinya cut to the chase first—“What brought you to that bar?”

“Oh, just this and that... All right, all right, sheesh. I’ll tell you, okay?”

Jinya glared at the man as he tried to evade the question, but Somegorou’s aloof attitude didn’t falter. Jinya had heard the man returned to Kyoto some time ago, but here he was in Edo again. There had to be a reason he returned,

one that likely had to do with demons.

“It’s not like I’m keeping it a secret anyway,” Somegorou continued. “There’s this strange incident that happened in Kyoto. A man killed his own younger brother...which, alone, isn’t particularly unusual at all.”

He explained the incident in full. It had nothing to do with demons at all and was your all too common, if tragic, case of murder. As he said, it was nothing particularly unusual.

He continued, “Normally I’d ignore such a standalone event, but there have been far too many such instances lately: a good-natured man suddenly killing those he knew, youths turning to violence, drunken arguments leading to deadly brawls—it’s uncanny, really.”

What they all had in common was men who suddenly changed in personality and became violent—something Jinya had recently witnessed himself. “I thought things were a tad suspicious, so I investigated the brothers from the first case. Apparently the younger one was an alcohol lover, and the older one bought a rare liquor for them to share. They were drinking at night when the younger brother was killed. I looked into the other cases as well and found the same liquor was also consumed. Naturally, I came to suspect this liquor, imported from Edo, was somehow the cause.”

His expression turned serious then. His arrival at that bar was no coincidence, it seemed. He had deduced a strange liquor was at the root of all these cases. Jinya had the same suspicions himself—perhaps his reunion with Somegorou was somehow fated...

“The liquor is called Snow’s Memory,” Somegorou said. “I’m currently searching for where it’s made.”

The two of them were both after the same thing after all.

Edo was fast asleep.

Winter nights typically held clear skies with nothing obscuring the light of the stars. Tonight, however, was different. Thick clouds blotted out the stars, washing the city streets in subdued colors. Two men strutted along, cold winds

blowing past them. The chill was numbing. One spoke to the other, and a cold cloud of vapor came out his mouth.

“Akitsu Somegorou, what do you know about that liquor?”

“Oh, just about nothin’, really. All I know is that drinking it makes you lose your mind and turn violent.”

Certainly, Zenji’s eyes did not seem sane back then. He had enough rage in him to kill without hesitation. If Snow’s Memory was what induced such rage, then the events that followed after could be explained as well.

“What d’ya know then?” Somegorou asked.

“About the same. Except I also know of a liquor store up ahead that sells Snow’s Memory in bulk. They sold out almost immediately after stocking it.”

“Oh, a liquor store, huh? That’s a good lead.” With that plastered smile on, Somegorou squinted at the darkness ahead.

While no longer the marshland it was in the past, Fukagawa still became terribly cold at night. The sky was absent of stars and covered in thick clouds. It appeared ready to snow on them at any moment.

After some more walking, they reached the liquor store in question. The crowd a few days ago had left Jinya unable to see much of the building itself, but now he saw it was an old building made with aged wood. It doubled as a residence, like many stores did, and didn’t seem like the kind of place that would be so popular.

“Why are we visiting at night, though?” Somegorou asked.

“To sneak in.”

“Oh right, you have that power that lets you turn invisible.”

“I do. I figured we could maybe threaten someone into talking.”

“Ha ha! You’re a monster!”

“Didn’t you already know that?” Jinya’s response was dry. Expressionlessly, he grabbed his scabbard with his left hand.

Somegorou’s frivolous smile faded as his expression turned stiff. He glared at

the liquor store. “Let’s leave the jokes at that, eh? That liquor goin’ around leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I reckon we shouldn’t let it get around anymore than it already has.”

“I feel the same.”

They didn’t have time to seek a peaceful resolution; the sanity-stealing liquor had already caused deaths and needed to be put to a stop. Stone-faced, Jinya took a step forward, then immediately froze. “Hey...”

“I know.”

The door was slightly ajar. It’d be wishful thinking to chalk it up to employees carelessly forgetting to lock up. Something was clearly off. They knew that much not by intuition but by the chills they got from the familiar smells of rust and fat, and the viscosity of the air that clung to their skin.

“It smells of blood...” Jinya said. Perhaps due to winter’s chill, the faint scent stung his nose like needles. Even so, he wouldn’t turn back. He put his hand on the door and silently slid it open.

He stepped inside to find smashed bottles all over. A fissure ran through a wall, and the furniture was damaged. Most notable, however, was the heavy stench of blood that overpowered all the smell of liquor.

“Ah, jeez...” Somegorou frowned with displeasure, his aloof act cast aside.

A corpse of a man lay on the dirt floor of the store. He was probably the store’s owner judging by the fine haori coat he wore, but his body was disfigured beyond recognition. He was soaked in blood, and parts of his body had been crushed. His joints were bent in impossible directions, and his face had been pulped like a pomegranate. He had clearly been beaten to death, but a corpse left *this* disfigured was a rare sight.

“Just sickening,” Somegorou angrily murmured under his breath. The corpse must have been severely beaten even after death to be left in such a sorry state.

“I don’t see any...” Jinya didn’t so much as blink at the gruesome sight and instead looked around the store.

Somegorou expressed some disgust at Jinya's coldness, but his priorities were the same. He collected himself and asked, "Don't see any what?"

"Snow's Memory. I figured there'd be at least one left over."

"Weren't you the one who said they sold out as soon as they stocked? Ah... I think I know why they're missing." With a tilt of his chin, Somegorou gestured to an undamaged shelf. Displayed on it were bottles of liquor, but only one spot was empty. Elsewhere around the shop, many shelves holding liquor were knocked over, and places that contained other expensive items were largely untouched.

It was odd to see just one shelf undamaged. Jinya brushed it with a finger and saw no dust. Something was stocked here, and it hadn't been long since it'd been removed. He said, "How strange."

"Perhaps the ones who broke in here destroyed the other shelves because they didn't have what they wanted, then carefully took off with what was on these shelves."

"You think Snow's Memory was on this shelf then? But who'd kill for a few bottles of liquor?"

As they talked, Somegorou reached into his robe and Jinya popped Yarai from its scabbard. Jinya then sharpened his senses and steeled his arms and legs.

"It's a liquor that robs you of sanity," Somegorou said. "What's to stop them from killing for a few bottles?"

"You're right. It's wrong to expect common sense from these drunkards." Jinya took a deep breath and held it.

"Go, paper swallow."

Three figures approached. Somegorou spun around and extended his arm, and a swallow sped forth from it. The swallow pierced one approaching assailant like a blade, then nose-dived and pierced a second assailant—a demon with dark-red skin and a look of rage—through the crown of its head and out its torso.

"Impressive," Jinya remarked.

“...Just puttin’ it out there, but you can’t have this one,” Somegorou said, half glaring. He seemed to still be hung up on what happened with his dog spirits.

Jinya leisurely drew his blade. The third demon appeared from the darkness. With palpable malice, it ignored Somegorou and charged at Jinya. Its movements were terribly simple, however. Jinya stepped diagonally backwards with his left leg and pushed off his right leg, twisting his torso and slicing horizontally. The demon’s malice-clouded eyes couldn’t even grasp what happened as its torso separated from its lower half in the blink of an eye.

“You’re not bad yourself,” Somegorou said. He was versed in artifact spirit usage, not martial arts—but he still knew skill when he saw it.

The three demons hadn’t even posed a proper fight, but Jinya frowned regardless. “Any guess as to why these were here?”

“Hmm, perhaps demons fancy a good drink too?”

Somegorou answered in a joking tone, but Jinya couldn’t deny the possibility. Snow’s Memory was shrouded in just that much mystery. It wasn’t unthinkable for demons to be drawn to it as well.

As Jinya sank into silence, the stench of blood seemed to grow stronger. They both turned to leave the store. Somegorou wanted to give the store owner’s body a proper burial, but they couldn’t risk being caught and wound up leaving the body where it was.

“Oh, snow...” Jinya said.

They stepped out to find it was snowing yet again. White tufts of flowerlike flakes silently fell from the sky.

It seemed to snow nightly as of late.

Jinya felt no particular emotion. Snow was beautiful, yes, but it was equally troublesome with how it obstructed sight.

“Just great...”

He much preferred clear, starry skies to winter clouds. He found nights lit with pale moonlight to be more beautiful than the sight of snow, perhaps because it reminded him of a particular moment spent on a riverbank.

Come to think of it, the night sky looked much more beautiful back then than it did these days, even with those memories being so far in the past.

4

I'M HERE, waiting for you.

"Dad..."

"Alcohol! Get me more alcohol!"

Jinya's wake-up call that day wasn't a pleasant one. The neighboring father-daughter pair were arguing again, this time early in the morning. The thin walls of the cheap rowhouse did nothing to block out their voices.

His cramped room was even more cramped last night, and he had a hard time sleeping. On top of these shouts now waking him up, he felt like he hadn't rested at all.

"*Yaaawn...*" Akitsu Somegorou, the reason why Jinya's room was so cramped, stretched and yawned hugely as he, too, was awakened by the neighboring shouts. He had arrived in Edo the day before and hadn't found lodging, so he coerced Jinya into letting him sleep in his room. In a way, he had a lot of guts sharing a room with a half stranger who he knew was a demon. "Mornin'. I'm feelin' mighty hungry; do you have somethin' to eat here?"

Jinya was flummoxed by how unguarded the man could be. He had to be stupid or just incredibly bold, but there was no telling which. At the very least, Jinya understood he was trusted to a degree. He replied, "No."

"Shoot. I guess I'll go find someplace to eat then. You comin' with?" The man's pasted-on smile revealed none of his true thoughts. Jinya sighed, exasperated at the inscrutability of the man he had joined hands with.

Last night's snow had continued until morning, leaving Edo covered in a blanket of white. Occasionally, a beam of light would shine through the clouds

and reflect brightly off the snow. It crunched pleasingly underfoot as they walked along. Jinya hadn't the adolescent heart to enjoy snow as he once could, but this aspect of winter certainly wasn't unpleasant.

The only places to eat nearby were the teahouse and Kihee. They decided on Kihee and made the walk there, but it wasn't Ofuu's usual smile greeting them—it was an angry shout.

“What, you got a problem with us, huh?!”

“N-not at all.”

Beyond the entrance curtains were two angry, red-faced men shouting profanities at Ofuu, who was cowering with tears in her eyes. The restaurant owner was in the kitchen with Natsu, probably trying to keep his customer out of harm's way. Of course, the restaurant owner wasn't about to let his beloved daughter be hurt either, and he was angrily reaching for a knife. Figuring that could lead to problems, Jinya stepped further into the restaurant and spoke up before the restaurant owner could leave the kitchen. “What's the meaning of this?”

Everyone in the restaurant stopped and looked at him: the familiar faces with surprise and the two unfamiliar faces with malice.

“J-Jinya-kun.” Her expression softened with relief upon seeing Jinya. She might be a demon, but Ofuu was still a woman. Being cornered by much bigger men like this terrified her.

“Who the hell are you?” One of the men approached him. Jinya frowned at the reek of liquor coming off him—not because it was unpleasant, but because it was uncanny for alcohol to be an issue again. Could this also be the influence of the sanity-stealing Snow's Memory?

“What do you think: A regular drunk? Or something more?” Jinya asked Somegorou.

“Hmm, both are possible, but I suspect the latter.” Somegorou's plastered-on smile faded as he assumed his cold demon hunter look.

“What the hell are you yapping about, brat?!” the man said with a glare.

“Erm, I’m pretty sure this fellow here’s older than you,” Somegorou quipped with a serious look. Even in this kind of situation, he felt no tension.

Jinya had enough of waiting and swung with his right fist before the man could speak again.

“Gah?!” The strike hit the man squarely in the jaw. His eyes rolled back in his head from the impact, and he collapsed.

“What about you?” Jinya said to the other man.

Feeling as though he was being made light of, the other man didn’t run but instead grew enraged. “You little sh—”

But he was too slow. Jinya closed the distance in an instant and punched him in the stomach. The man likely had no time to process what had happened. He doubled over and fell to the ground.

“Sheesh, ya sure don’t hold back,” Somegorou said.

“I did, though.”

“I mean...technically, I guess ya did?”

The fact that he didn’t kill them outright was him holding back, or so Jinya seemed to think. Somegorou wasn’t quite so sure.

Ofuu breathed a sigh of relief. She appeared ready to collapse at any moment, her usual perfect posture gone. Jinya wanted to say something to comfort her, but he stopped and glared coldly instead.

“B-bastard... I’ll kill ya...”

The man punched in the gut shouldn’t be able to stand, and the other man should be out cold. But here they were, getting up again, albeit slowly. Jinya had indeed held back, but any normal human should still be incapacitated after those blows. Jinya braced himself for further fighting, but the two men ignored him and bolted out of the restaurant as though chasing something.

“Wait, damn it!” one of the men said.

Stunned by the unexpected turn of events, everyone stared blankly at the still-fluttering entrance curtains for a moment—save for Somegorou, who had a

wide smile on his face.

“What did you do?” Jinya asked.

“Hm? What d’ya mean?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

“Aha ha, no need to get so scary, I’ll tell you, okay? Here.” Somegorou opened his hand so only Jinya could see, revealing a clam shell with a lacquer painting inside. “In Qing, *Shen*, er...basically this clam thing, is said to breathe in spring and summer from the ocean to create a non-existent tower. This is how people explained away mirages. It would make sense then that a clamshell artifact spirit would be capable of similar things, don’t you think?”

Artifact spirits were souls that appeared in items after a hundred years of use. As a user of artifact spirits, Akitsu Somegorou was skilled in drawing out the abilities of these ancient items, including abilities that came from their associated legends. In other words, the clamshell artifact spirit could make mirages. If Somegorou’s words were to be believed, then he led the men away with such a mirage.

“They’re surprisingly useful and can be used to show only select people something. You’ve even been tricked by them yourself, remember?”

Jinya recalled the time they fought. He had struck at Somegorou with what should have been a finishing blow but instead missed completely. If that had been a mirage, then this was a useful power indeed.

“But just what mirage did you show them to make them run out like that?” Jinya asked.

“Oh, that’s not worth mentioning. More importantly, I’m starving. Let’s just eat.”

Figuring he couldn’t press him for an answer, Jinya relented.

“Um, thank you for saving me, Jinya-kun,” Ofuu said.

“Oh, sure,” he weakly replied. He didn’t think he deserved it, as the one who tricked those men into running out was Somegorou. Unfortunately, nobody knew that as only the two men who ran out could see the mirage.

“And you too, Akitsu-san.”

“Oh, I hardly did anything.”

“Yeah, you just stood around and watched, right?” Natsu said, stepping out of the kitchen.

“Ha ha, you got me there, missy.” Somegorou smiled wryly. He had no intention of talking and played the fool to hide his secrets. “Anyway, Ofuu-chan, can I get a tempura soba?”

“Right away. I assume you’ll want a kake soba, Jinya-kun?”

“Please.”

Finally, they could eat. It was only morning, and yet Jinya already felt exhausted.

“So yeah, that’s why he’s working his butt off right now. But you reap what you sow, you know?” Natsu was more than happy to fill Jinya in on what happened to Zenji after they parted. Zenji hadn’t been fired from his post as manager, but he had incurred Jyuuzou’s wrath and got up for work early this morning to try and earn his trust back.

“How is he physically?”

“He has some aches, but he’s well enough to work.”

“Has he said or done anything strange?”

“Nope. It’s looking like all that happened was just because he was drunk.” She smiled softly and genuinely, perhaps out of relief. But Jinya didn’t share that relief.

Zenji couldn’t drink Snow’s Memory at first but could later. There were many others who called the liquor sublime and happily lapped it down. Judging from the crowd at the liquor store and the men just now, Snow’s Memory was spreading through Edo at a rapid pace. Things were still fine right now, but what would happen when the liquor was prolific?

A gruesome thought surfaced, one so feasible that it nauseated Jinya.

“Thanks for worrying about Zenji,” Natsu said. “But he’s doing fine now.”

“I see. Glad to hear it.”

He didn’t let his thoughts show, however. He saw no need to worry Natsu for nothing. Trying his hardest to act as he usually did, he took a sip of tea.

With the conversation over and no worries left on her mind, she stood up. “I’ll be heading out. I’m going to go check in on Zenji and maybe buy something for Father to put him in a good mood.” She was surprisingly worried for Zenji if she was thinking of paying out of pocket to try appeasing her father for him. “Maybe I’ll buy him one of those liquors he likes.”

“Don’t,” he said strongly. The mention of alcohol reflexively made his words sterner than he intended.

She flinched at the sudden change of mood. “H-huh? What’s up with you?”

“Jyuuzou-dono’s been drinking Snow’s Memory every night, right? There’s something off with that liquor. Tell him to drink something else instead.”

She gulped at his seriousness, then nodded. Relieved, he finally relaxed. “Thank you. Take care on your way home; it’s been dangerous as of late.”

“...You sound like Father. But thank you anyway.” She relaxed as well, giggling innocently. She left the restaurant with a spring in her step.

Watching her go, Somegorou smiled wryly as he whispered, “Looks like it’s still a sparrow, huh.”

“Indeed. I don’t see a clam appearing anytime soon,” Ofuu replied, clearly enjoying herself as well. Jinya glanced sideways at them, having no clue what they were on about, but that only made Ofuu grin even harder. “But I’m sure it’s only a matter of time.”

In the end, they didn’t choose to enlighten Jinya, so he could do nothing but sigh in exasperation.

“Hey there, Ronin. I see you’ve brought yourself a friend this time.”

Around the time twilight gave way to night, Jinya and Somegorou arrived at

Yanagibashi Bridge. Soon after, a woman seemed to emerge from the snowy darkness. It was the streetwalker, holding a tattered umbrella and smiling seductively as a white cloud of vapor escaped her lips.

“He’s not a friend,” Jinya said. “Maybe you could say a tag-along?”

“Aw. You’re not wrong, but you don’t need to be so distant,” Somegorou said with a polite, fake smile.

The streetwalker glanced at him briefly. Finding nothing interesting about the Kyoto man, she looked back at Jinya. “Anyway, I looked into that thing for you.”

The air seemed to grow tense, and not solely because of the cold.

She continued, “I haven’t been able to figure out where the liquor is made or how it’s being brought into Edo, but I did discover the main store that stocks it. It’s a wholesale liquor store in Kuramae that delivers to many of Edo’s liquor stores.”

“You work fast,” Jinya remarked.

“I try my best. You’ve been to this Kuramae liquor store before, though, remember? There was a request to kill a demon in one of their storehouses.”

Jinya had killed a young demon named Kikuo there. He remembered the job well, perhaps because it had left him with such a foul taste in his mouth. Back then, the store’s owner mentioned that they had just stocked a good liquor—perhaps that had been Snow’s Memory.

She continued, “Some customers have asked where Snow’s Memory was made, but the store owner just claims that it’s a gift from the gods he sourced from a spring he found. He could be joking, though.”

“...Like in the story of the dutiful son who found Kikusuisen Spring? That’s a bit shameless of him, don’t you think?” Somegorou said.

Kikusuisen Spring was a spring from an old tale that gushed liquor. Once upon a time, there was a man who, though poor, worked hard to provide for his elderly father and prayed for the latter’s longevity. His father loved to drink, but alcohol was a rare luxury as the family had difficulty even affording their meals.

One day, the man went deep into the mountains to look for firewood as he

always did when he slipped and fell into a gorge. Luckily, he was only lightly hurt, and he woke up mostly without issue, save for a dry throat. Led by his thirst, the man followed the sound of water and happened upon a nearby stream. He drew closer and saw a beautiful sight: a graceful waterfall that stretched as high as the eye could see.

With gratitude in his heart, he bent down and scooped up some nearby spring water to drink. He was shocked, however, to find that it was not water at all but alcohol more fragrant than any he had ever smelled before. He brought some home to his father, who quickly asked where the delicious liquor came from. The man recounted what happened, to which his father said he must have been rewarded by the gods for being a dutiful son.

Word of what happened reached the Empress of the time. Full of admiration, she rewarded the man and changed the name of the era to Yoro (717-724 AD; literally meaning “to care for one’s elders”). The waterfall the man saw also came to be known as Yoro Waterfall, and the spring came to be known as Kikusuisen Spring, its water praised by the Empress herself as being capable of returning youth to the elderly.

This story was a well-known one often depicted in books. If the liquor store owner said what he did with knowledge of this story, then he was an incredibly shameless man indeed.

“It is a bit shameless, yes, but let’s put that matter aside,” the streetwalker said. “From what I’ve heard, the store owner has been out these past two days on a trip to restock Snow’s Memory. I don’t know if he’s gone to the mountains like in the story, but he’s supposed to be back tomorrow evening. Perhaps this is worth looking into?”

“It just might be. Thank you.” Jinya reached into his robe and gave the streetwalker a bag of sen coins. She took it without checking the contents, perhaps as a sign of trust.

“Oh, and one more thing. Apparently, this liquor store—which is called Mizukiya, by the way—is occasionally visited by a beautiful woman with blonde hair. So, there’s a chance this liquor might be made in another country entirely.”

“It’s not,” Jinya quickly said. The streetwalker found his sudden response a surprise, as did Jinya himself. He had spoken reflexively and without thinking. Even he didn’t know why he was so certain. He added, “At least, I get a feeling it’s not.”

“Uh-huh... I wouldn’t gamble on a feeling myself, but if you say so.”

He just couldn’t imagine that nostalgic-tasting, rustic liquor being made in some other country. That was all there was to it; nothing more, and nothing less...

He told himself this, reassured himself that was everything, but part of him knew better than to believe his own lies.

And so, daybreak came.

Somegorou stayed over at the cheap rowhouse again, making for an uncomfortable night of sleep in the cramped room. Feeling stiff, Jinya rotated his arms to relax his tight shoulders.

Somegorou had woken before him and waved lightly in place of a morning greeting. “We’re headin’ off to Mizukiya today, right?”

“Yeah. We have some time to kill, though.”

“How about we go to Kihee then? I kinda wanna tease that li’l missy a little more.”

Jinya couldn’t tell if the man was serious or joking. He was sure Somegorou had a decent set of values about him, given how he wanted to properly bury that one corpse they found, but overall, he remained hard to read still.

“Dad, I think it’s time you stop.”

“I said shut it!”

The father-daughter pair next door began fighting, interrupting Jinya’s thoughts. The shouting was as angry as it always was, and the father’s piercing voice echoed through the whole rowhouse.

“Wow, first thing in the morning?” Somegorou commented nonchalantly,

clearly not too interested in the affairs of others.

Jinya, being used to the neighbors' arguing, paid the voices no mind and started getting ready. He figured it was just a morning like any other, but he would soon be proven wrong.

"Gack...! Agh!"

"Dad? Dad?!" The daughter shouted in concern as someone started to gag. Something broke with a loud crack, and the rowhouse itself creaked as a loud commotion began. "St-stop it, Dad! Stop it!"

It didn't seem like their usual argument. Feeling like something was wrong, Somegorou's carefree attitude disappeared. "Hey, that doesn't sound too good."

It certainly sounded too violent to be one of their usual arguments. Jinya listened carefully. The sound of things breaking had ceased. The sound of arguing had stopped as well but was replaced by the father's pained groaning and the daughter's worried voice—scratch that: Her voice wasn't worried, but terrified. Jinya wondered if this was a case of drunken violence, but he soon abandoned the thought.

"Nguaaaagh... Ooooghh..." A deep voice growled, one terribly inhuman.

"Jinya!"

Jinya was already in motion. He grabbed Yarai and ran out of the rowhouse. Small flakes of morning snow fell, but he had no time to stop and appreciate them. He bolted to the neighboring room, then kicked down the door and leapt in.

He heard the soft sound of tearing, then saw a hideous demon rise to its feet and groan. At the demon's feet was the headless corpse of a girl. Fresh blood dripped down from the demon's palms. The father Jinya knew was not in the room. Jinya wasn't daft enough to wonder where he had gone. "...He became a demon?"

He unsheathed Yarai and took up a stance with his blade horizontally by his side. He trained a glare on the demon.

The demon's body went rigid for a moment before it sprang forward with hatred in its eyes. Despite having just been born, it was nimble. It planted a left foot forward, then turned its body to slam into Jinya. However, Jinya managed to dodge out of the way, leaving the demon to crash out and into the rowhouse across the way.

The noise had caused a few people to gather. Jinya worried for a moment, but for some reason the demon's malice was only directed toward him. It appeared it had no interest in changing targets. It was a mystery as to why, but it worked out in Jinya's favor regardless. He gripped his sword tight and lowered his stance.

The demon righted itself and curled his hands into fists, then repeatedly swung at Jinya's head with its hard hands. Unlike other freshly born demons, its attacks were strong and well targeted, but that was all. It was no grand opponent.

Jinya stepped in low and grazed past the demon's fists. Pushing off his left foot, he turned his torso and sent momentum from his hips along his arms for a full-powered horizontal slash.

The demon was cut cleanly in half, instantly extinguishing its life.

"Not bad." Somegorou gave a round of applause, having watched everything from start to finish.

Jinya felt no pride in what he had done, however. Not that Somegorou was smiling either, for that matter. "Akitsu Somegorou..."

"I know."

The drunken father had become a demon. Alcohol was somehow involved yet again. The bottles the father drank from had been shattered, so there was no confirming what liquor he drank for sure, but the two men had a good feeling they knew what it was.

Zenji hadn't ended up like that, so perhaps there was a delay in the liquor's effect. A frightening possibility, likely close to the truth, crossed Jinya's mind.

"Looks like we have some more things to ask that liquor store owner."

His breath was white. The snow was only growing heavier.

5

SNOW HAD BEEN falling since morning, covering Edo in a blanket of white by the time the clouds began to darken.

“Pardon my intrusion, Father.” Natsu entered the room to find Jyuuzou drinking alone, as he often did. In the past, he used to drink as though the liquor were foul, but lately he seemed peaceful as he drank. That was why it was a surprise to see him drinking bitterly again now. Perhaps he was angry about what happened with Zenji.

“...Oh. Natsu.” Jyuuzou glanced over with knitted brows, then looked away, downed his drink, and poured himself another cup.

“Um, I wanted to talk to you about Zenji...”

“What about him?” There was clear irritation in his tone.

“Are you angry with him?”

“...I’m disappointed with him. He made a foolish choice, and after all I’ve done for him.”

There was no world in which it was okay for a newly appointed manager to drink the days away. Zenji was reaping the consequences of being irresponsible. That said, he did regret his actions, so Natsu wanted him let off lightly if possible.

“O-oh yeah, um, I brought something for you,” she said. She had brought a gift in an attempt to placate her father. She had initially planned to buy him the liquor he was drinking nightly, but Jinya strongly urged her not to, so she picked out some tea cakes instead.

“Thank you. I’ll eat them later.” His eyes narrowed with interest, but his attention quickly returned to his cup, which he downed in one gulp. He’d been drinking in greater amounts lately.

“Um, Father? Maybe you should cut back a little,” she suggested, as Jinya had

asked her to.

Jyuuzou poured out another cup, his expression unchanging. “No. I’m in the mood for drink right now.”

He emptied his cup. The bottle on the floor read: Snow’s Memory.

In Kuramae, Edo, the owner of the liquor store Mizukiya sat in a tatami mat room located toward the back, an avaricious grin on his face as he flipped through the store’s ledger. The store’s profits had been exceptional lately. Their earnings far outdid what a low-end shogunate vassal earned, which was a sizable amount, and showed no signs of slowing down. The store’s owner had that woman to thank for it all. A wide grin still on his face, he murmured, “How could I have ever doubted her? Clearly, she is my goddess of fortune, here to bless me.”

She first appeared before him some years ago, her hair like fluttering golden threads drawing his attention. She looked so captivating, it hurt to look away. Instead of being enraptured, however, he felt fear at the sight of her. Her beauty was *inhuman*, as though she were something otherworldly in nature.

She said to him, *Any interest in stocking a quality liquor that people will go mad for?*

There was no way he could say no to her offer. Though wary of her, he began selling Snow’s Memory—partly out of fear for his life and partly out of greed, as she assured him the product would sell like hotcakes. It turned out she was right. Even now, that liquor continued to fly off the shelves. It tasted harsh the first time someone drank it, but by the second cup they would become enamored and continue to drink forevermore. Some who took too fondly to the liquor tended to overdrink, but what happened to them was none of his business. He wouldn’t be a very good liquor store owner if he worried about what happened to every fool that drank themselves silly, after all.

He closed the ledger and walked out into the courtyard where his two storehouses stood. He stepped into one and grinned. Inside was a large volume of liquor bottles, all Snow’s Memory, freshly restocked just today. It should only take a few days for it to all sell out.

At the rate things were going, he'd eventually be Edo's greatest merchant. He imagined the rich future that awaited him and laughed. "Heh heh heh, ha ha ha ha!"

"I take it business is going well?"

A voice as cold as iron made the store owner freeze up. He turned around to see a towering man with a sword at his hip, almost six shaku in height. The store owner was *certain* the man hadn't been there a second ago; he had just looked over the liquor bottles in that direction. And yet, there the man—Jinya—was, standing as though his presence wasn't strange at all.

"Wh-who—"

"We met about two years ago, I believe. Do you remember me?"

"Oh, um... Y-yes, yes, I remember. You took care of that demon that was in here for me." He recalled the man was a ronin, well known for supposedly being able to kill a demon in a single strike. The ronin disposed of Kikuo for him, which he was grateful for, but the fact that he trespassed so shamelessly now was concerning—especially as he was trespassing into the storehouse, the lifeblood of any business.

"Thank you for your help back then," the store owner said. "However, I must ask you to leave, as you are trespassing on my property." The store owner felt he had every right to kick him out, but the ronin didn't reply; he simply stared coldly. The chill of his gaze raised the hair on the store owner's skin. Overwhelmed, he took one step back, then a second.

"I suppose trespassin' was rude of us, but there was somethin' we just had to talk to you about, you see," another voice said.

With a start, the store owner looked to see a second, unfamiliar man standing behind the ronin. The ronin had brought along a friend, and it didn't seem like the two were up to any good.

"Wh-what do you want?" the store owner said in a frightened voice. To put it bluntly, he was scared witless. He didn't consider himself to be a coward, but in such a dark place with nowhere to run, he felt helpless.

"We want to have a little chat with you, is all. Just a few questions, then we'll

be on our way,” the unfamiliar man said. He stood at the exit with his arms crossed. He had no intention of allowing an escape.

The ronin’s left hand was holding his scabbard. The store owner’s choice was made for him. With a forced, polite smile, he said, “I see. Well, what can I help you with?”

His smile did nothing to win over the men. The ronin in particular seemed as rigid as iron and replied gravely, his voice barely breaking the silence. “We’re looking for a liquor.”

“A-a liquor, you say?”

“Yes, one that’s been popular lately and seems not to be stocked anywhere. I heard this store has some, however.”

As it would turn out, the men came on perfectly normal business—at least, it would be normal if they didn’t have him cornered in a dark room.

Seeing that the store owner wasn’t replying, the ronin took a step closer and firmly repeated, “I heard this store has some, however.”

If the man himself were iron, then his narrowed glare was a sharp sword. Feeling the hostility directed his way, the store owner trembled.

“You have it, don’t you? Snow’s Memory?” the ronin asked. His emotionless eyes were not the eyes of a drunk searching for liquor. One wrong word and it would be the store owner’s head rolling on the floor—that much was clear.

“My, what a sight. Isn’t this *all* Snow’s Memory?” the other man asked nonchalantly.

The storehouse was tightly packed with liquor. The liquor that people went mad for. The store’s very lifeblood.

“Heh heh, heh heh heh,” the store owner awkwardly laughed. “I-It is indeed. It’s our most popular liquor, freshly restocked just today.”

“Oh really? Where from?” the other man asked.

“O-oh, I couldn’t possibly share that. T-trade secrets, you know?”

“Aw. That’s a shame...”

In one fluid, flowing motion, the ronin drew his sword from its scabbard, the blade winking with a dull gleam in the night. And what a blade it was. Perhaps a masterwork, the blade enamored the store owner with its beauty, at least until the ronin took another step closer.

“E-EEK!”

“...I suppose we have to ask a little more strongly, then,” the man said casually. The indifference in his tone seemed to reflect his indifference toward killing.

“Come try a cup, Natsu.”

Jyuuzou cajoled Natsu to drink with him, but she hesitated. Snow’s Memory was what made Zenji act strangely, and Jinya had said not to drink it. But her dear father hardly ever offered the chance to partake in something together like this. Overjoyed at the opportunity, she couldn’t bring herself to refuse.

“J-just one cup then.” *Just one cup should be fine*, she told herself. With some trepidation, she raised the cup to her lips.

It was strong, but not to the point that she wanted to spit it out. Naotsugu and Zenji had been exaggerating, it seemed. She swallowed it, feeling the burning warmth of liquor slide down her throat. Alcohol really wasn’t her thing.

“Could you pour for me?” he asked. While she couldn’t join him as a drinking partner, she could fill his cup for him. After she did just that, he nodded in quiet gratitude and downed the cup in one go. He showed no sign he minded the harshness she tasted, but he did seem a little displeased as he drank. His brow was knit, despite how much he had praised the drink before.

“Another.”

He held out his cup, and she poured. That cycle repeated into the night.

Jinya hung his arms loosely by his side, not even bothering to take a stance, and approached the owner of Mizukiya, causing him to crawl away backward on all fours.

“There’ve been a number of odd incidents as of late,” Jinya said. “All of them involving people who drank Snow’s Memory.”

“Ah, I-I don’t...”

“This is no normal liquor. Where did you get it from?”

The store owner tried to crawl further back, but he hit something with a dull *thunk*. His back was against his store of liquor bottles now; there was nowhere left to retreat to. He looked at the gleaming piece of cold iron in front of him, colder than winter’s chill, and let out a quiet shriek. As the blade’s tip slowly neared, he quickly reached his breaking point. “I-I got it on Oyama Mountain in Sagami province! There’s a spring halfway up! S-Snow’s Memory wells up from there! All I did was bottle it!”

“I see you don’t value your life,” Jinya said. “I commend your persistence in keeping your trade secret, however. Die proud.”

“W-w-wait, I-I’m not lying, I’m not lying! There’s really a spring that wells liquor there! Please believe me!”

Jinya scrutinized the store owner. He saw no sign the terrified man was lying. His claim sounded absurd, but the story of Kikusuisen Spring lent some credence. Snow’s Memory was no ordinary liquor, so it stood to reason that its source wasn’t ordinary either. He asked, “Just what is Snow’s Memory?”

“I-I don’t know! That woman only told me it was a quality liquor that people would go mad for, a delicious but addictive drink that would send people spiraling into anger if drunk at length. That’s all I know!”

The woman he referred to must be the blonde-haired woman who visited the store. Jinya had a vague idea who it could be. He tried his hardest to suppress the hatred now welling up inside him as he continued his questioning. “There has to be something else you know.”

“Th-there isn’t, really! That’s all that woman told me!”

Jinya had thought the store owner would know more, but it appeared he was just a pawn being used by someone else.

“You sold this stuff without even knowing what it is?” Jinya scoffed.

“W-well, it’s only harmful if drunk in large quantities! In moderation, it’s no different than any normal liquor! B-besides, all liquor is bad for you if you drink too much, right?! I just sold the stuff. Those who drank themselves mad and hurt others are responsible for what they did themselves! I’m just an honest merchant trying to turn a profit for himself. Is that so wrong?!”

The store owner lashed out with one excuse after another, but Jinya didn’t flinch; instead, he glared even more coldly than before. With this, it was clear—this man was a mere merchant, far removed from the heart of this case. He had nothing valuable to tell. Jinya frowned, his brow creasing with disappointment. He didn’t sheathe his sword yet, however, as he was a little irritated.

Even Somegorou looked displeased, a frown on his face. He said, “...You did it for money? That’s it? A pathetic reason like that?”

The poor store owner trembled before the enraged two. An oppressive silence followed, ultimately broken by a sigh from Somegorou. “Well, at least we now have reliable evidence Snow’s Memory is the cause of all the incidents going around,” he said. “Guess we better go check out Oyama Mountain—after disposin’ of all the liquor here, of course.”

“D-disposing?! You can’t be serious!”

“Of course I’m serious. Did ya really expect us to just go off and leave this dangerous substance here?”

The store owner seemed like he wanted to argue further, but Jinya cut him off, saying, “Hold on, I’m not done with my questions yet.” He grabbed the store owner’s collar and pulled him to his feet.

“Eeek?! ”

“Wha—hey, what’re ya doing?” Even Somegorou was surprised by his roughness, but his voice was just background noise to Jinya right now.

“One last question. I heard a blonde-haired woman visits this place...” As Jinya said those words, his hostility changed into something else entirely. It smoldered from deep within him, words like *malice* and *anger* unable to do it justice. It was a muddied, filthy emotion; his eyes shadowed with loathing. “Tell me all you know about her.”

The store owner couldn't answer. He couldn't even breathe properly and just wheezed instead.

"I said tell me, damn it!" Jinya grabbed the store owner's neck. He lifted the man so that he hung suspended from his left hand alone. Bones ground audibly as the store owner turned from red to purple, but even then, he wouldn't speak.

Fine, Jinya thought. If he doesn't want to talk, then I'll just snap his neck.

"I said cut it out already!"

Jinya felt something hit his cheek. A full moment later, it dawned on him that he had been punched. He looked to see Somegorou standing with his right arm thrust out, steadfast as he glared at Jinya. He must've hit Jinya with everything he had—very little could affect his demonic body. The punch didn't hurt, but the cold look of animosity in Somegorou's eyes stung a bit.

"Let him go already before ya go and kill him."

Jinya did as he was told and relaxed his left arm. The store owner dropped to the floor with a thud and immediately began breathing again between a fit of coughs. He would likely have suffocated if he had gone any longer without air.

Jinya began to calm down. The loathing inside him didn't fade, but it hid for the time being. He now understood what had happened, and what he had done. He had let his anger take hold of him and acted like a fool. Even after all this time, he hadn't changed in the slightest.

"...You know somethin' about this blonde woman?" Somegorou asked. There was no blame in his eyes, nor the usual fake smile on his face. His expression was simply the calm look of one who hunted demons.

"...No."

"Is that so? Well, I won't force ya to talk. But if you try to kill somebody again, like you just did, I'll have no choice but to put ya down myself. For both our sakes, don't let things come to that."

"Right. I'll be careful." Jinya's voice was hollow. Mentally, he understood what Somegorou was saying, but could Jinya really stop himself if it came to it? He

was still as pathetic as before, unable to shake off the hatred that controlled him. He had spent all these years pursuing nothing but strength, so why was he still so weak?

“Thank you for stopping me,” he said. He meant it. It was thanks to Somegorou that Jinya’s weaknesses didn’t get somebody killed for nothing. Jinya’s words were brief but heartfelt.

“Oh, please. It feels weird to be thanked for punchin’ you.” Perhaps feeling Jinya’s sincerity, Somegorou bashfully showed a real smile.

The mood was peaceful for a moment, but it was broken by the tinkle of shattering ceramic.

“Y-you can’t have ’em. This liquor is mine, all mine!” At some point, the store owner had pulled himself up with the support of a shelf. At his feet was a scattering of ceramic shards but not much spilled liquor. He must have drunk the bottles dry before shattering them on the ground.

“I won’t be killed here. This is *my* liquor. I’m going to become Edo’s greatest merchant.” He mumbled deliriously as he reached for his next bottle of Snow’s Memory and downed it. The liquor overflowed from the sides of his mouth as he drank, but he cared not and quickly reached for his next bottle.

“What the hell are ya doin’? You know what’ll happen to ya if you drink that, right?” Somegorou said.

“Shut it! You’re just trying to trick me so you can steal my fortune!” The store owner burned with hostility, perhaps because he was drunk, perhaps because he had almost been killed. He continued to drink without stopping.

“Stop,” Jinya murmured quietly, feeling a strange sense of unease. Snow’s Memory didn’t rob one of sanity; it stimulated one’s hatred. The principles behind it were a mystery, but that effect was apparent enough. What happened once hatred reached a boiling point was something Jinya knew well. The strange unease he felt now was, in actuality, a feeling of *déjà vu*. “Don’t drink any more, before it’s too late.”

The store owner had said the liquor would make one spiral into anger if drunk at length—but that meant much more than one would think. The body was but

a container for the heart, and the shape a heart took was decided by one's emotions. If one's emotions were unwavering, the heart and body would be just as unwavering. But if one's heart were instead mired in hatred, then the heart's container would take a different form to suit it. Jinya had seen the end result of excess hatred more times than he cared to count.

"G-gaah... Graaooooogh..." The store owner groaned, but his voice slowly eased into a growl. His body swelled, tearing his clothes. He could no longer be called human.

"Hey... Ain't this kinda bad?" Somegorou said.

"Yeah..." Jinya agreed.

Even if it was artificially induced, hatred had been piled onto the store owner's heart like a heavy layer of snow, obscuring its once-true form. Now hideous, he groaned mindlessly. His skin was red as though flushed from liquor, and bones protruded from him.

If Snow's Memory were a liquor that buried the heart in snow-white fury, then this result was but a natural conclusion.

"It's a liquor that instills hatred," Jinya said. "In other words, Snow's Memory exists to make demons."

The demon glared at Jinya with loathing. Within its wide eyes, a reddish gleam could be clearly seen despite the darkness of night.

Jinya continued, "It's fine in small amounts; there isn't a soul alive who doesn't already harbor hatred. But too much hatred consumes you, makes you a demon."

"And too much Snow's Memory leaves ya with the same result," Somegorou finished.

"Right."

Despite how calmly he spoke, Jinya was full of unease. Zenji had said Jyuuzou drank Snow's Memory nightly. If that were true, then it was only a matter of time before...before...

Jinya didn't want to finish the thought. In a rare moment of emotion, he

wavered while an enemy stood before him.

“F-Father?!”

Jyuuzou hunched over and trembled, groaning in pain. Natsu worried he had had too much to drink.

“Ngh, argh...”

“Somebody! Somebody, come help!” she shouted out, but no one came. This didn’t seem like an ordinary case of overdrinking. In the worst-case scenario, he could die from this. “Wait here. I’ll go call for a doctor.”

She hurriedly made to leave, but Jyuuzou moved to block her exit. His groaning and trembling had stopped. Perhaps he was fine now? She looked at his expression and realized that was not the case.

Something lumpy writhed under his clothes—no, the very shape of his body was changing. Bone and flesh swelled until he was no longer a person.

“A-ah...” This wasn’t her first time seeing such a form. Her surprise was light, and she felt no fear to speak of at all. All she felt welling up inside her was sadness. “Why...”

There was a time when the two were unsure of how to approach one another, but they had gradually opened up and grown closer, eventually becoming a true family despite not having bonds of blood. She felt no shame in calling Jyuuzou her father now. So why, *why*?

“...Yiin...taaah...”

Her father, whom she trusted and held dear to her heart, should be before her now. So why was there a demon in his place instead?

6

A BESTIAL GROWL echoed in the cold storehouse. A demon more than seven shaku tall stood before them, the length of its arms and legs uneven, as though the body's growth was too fast for it to manage. It narrowly resembled a

humanoid still, but that only made the mismatch of its limbs stand out even more. Its clothes had torn as the demon grew, and the demon's gray skin was now visible.

"...I recall its name was Kikuo," Jinya began, remembering the demon he had slain in this storehouse a while back. The sword he kept pointed at the demon shook slightly—whether out of anger or uncertainty, he did not know. His voice, however, was filled with more hostility than usual.

There was no doubt in his mind that the owner of Mizukiya had known Snow's Memory turned people into demons. But all the man did was bottle the liquor from the spring he found, so how could he have learned of its effects? Perhaps he heard what had happened to those who bought his liquor? No, that couldn't be it. As a businessman, he wouldn't sell something he didn't fully understand himself. Which left only one answer: "You forced him to drink it, didn't you? Your own shop apprentice."

To figure out just what Snow's Memory was before selling it, the store owner made one of his store apprentices drink it. Kikuo was his name—the young demon child who had holed up here in the storehouse.

The demon stirred slightly, groaning incomprehensibly. The store owner had sold the liquor knowing full well its effects. Jinya had no pity for him. He could kill the demon without a second thought and was about to rush into it, gripping the handle of his sword tightly.

The demon snarled as it charged forth. The floor of the storehouse caved in as the demon kicked off the ground. It closed the distance to Jinya unbelievably fast, thanks to its height of seven shaku. It had the musculature to move at such a speed now, and the onslaught of its punches was no slower.

Jinya stooped low, weaving through the strikes and making his way behind the demon. He aimed to finish this with a slashing blow before the demon could turn around, but he was too slow. The demon already had its gaze locked on him.

The air roared as the demon's hand cut through it. Its strike was too rough to call a punch; it was simply swinging its arm forward. But even that would be lethal with its demonic strength. And yet, Jinya could not retreat. He didn't have

time to waste. He had to make as quick work of the demon as possible, then rush to Sugaya.

Jinya boldly stepped in, slipping past the demon's strike and closing the distance. He swung his blade in a reverse diagonal slash and felt his blow land true, sword cutting flesh, but the amount of blood that expelled was too little. His strike didn't feel weak, so the demon's skin must simply have been more solid than he expected. It wouldn't be deterred by his blow.

The demon let out a senseless yell as it struck from above. Pressed for time, Jinya braced to take the blow and counterattacked. He crouched and extended his right arm, the soles of his feet digging into the ground as he leaned forward and thrust with his entire being.

"Gah...!"

As his sword pierced the demon's skin, the demon's strike hit him on the left side of his chest. He failed to kill the demon, but his own injuries turned out relatively light, which he found strange. He had taken a direct blow; by all means, he should be severely hurt. He had expected broken bones and internal injuries but had only felt a slight sting.

Somegorou stepped forward and said, "Your attacks are all over the place." In his right hand was a lucky sparrow netsuke sculpture. In winter, sparrows fluffed out their plumage to create a wall of air that protected them from the cold. This made them look adorably well fattened, which—after a play on words—earned the fluffed birds the name *lucky sparrow*.

The feathers of a lucky sparrow protected it from the cold; it stood to reason that a lucky sparrow artifact spirit could protect a person by raising their defenses. The unnatural endurance Jinya had witnessed in Somegorou must have been the lucky sparrow's power at play.

"Sorry. I appreciate the help," Jinya said.

"Don't worry 'bout it."

After a brief pause, the air roared as the demon once again swung at Jinya, interrupting their short exchange.

Jinya took up a stance, braced himself, and put strength into his feet. Instead

of retreating, he moved forward and swung for a slightly off-center overhead strike. He cut into flesh, but didn't stop there. Stepping in, he slammed his left shoulder into the demon's solar plexus. The demon reeled back slightly. Seeing an opportunity, Jinya stepped forward and made a reverse diagonal slash.

"Go, paper swallow." A swallow rushed forward, striking in tandem with Jinya's sword. The swallow appeared sharp enough to cut into the demon as well.

The demon bellowed as it flailed its arm to protect itself, easily deflecting the sword strike and the swallow. Jinya was knocked slightly off balance by this, but he kept a strong grip on his sword and forcibly swung at the demon's neck without fixing his balance. His blade cut, but not deeply. His off-balance strike lacked the power it needed.

"...This fellow's awfully strong despite just being born. Doesn't somethin' feel off to ya?" Somegorou asked.

Jinya dodged the demon's counterattack, retreated, and clicked his tongue in annoyance. The demon didn't follow. It just stood there and continued to groan. It was a lesser demon, meaning it had no special ability, but its strength, speed, and reflexes were abnormal. Nothing particularly stood out. It was just plain strong—far more than a freshly born demon should be.

"She must have prepared him for this beforehand..." Jinya said.

"Huh? What do ya mean?"

If the blonde-haired woman was indeed who Jinya thought she was, then he had a fair idea why this demon was so strong. The young man from the fable found Kikusuisen Spring because he was virtuous, but the owner of Mizukiya was guided to find Snow's Memory by the blonde-haired woman. In that case, one could think of the liquor as the woman's own creation rather than some mysterious spring drink. She made this liquor and was trying to distribute it widely while fully aware of its effects. But she also knew of a man with a vendetta against her and was certain to plan countermeasures.

The owner of Mizukiya was her measure to stop anyone who discovered the liquor's true nature. She had done something to the man to make him turn inhuman. At least, that was what Jinya thought. If his theory was correct, then

he had a good idea of what was going on with the spring the liquor came from as well.

“The question is whether the head or the body was used...” he murmured. His voice was steeped in anger. The image that flitted through his mind made him grit his teeth.

She would one day become a calamity that threatened all humanity, and her actions now were bringing her closer to becoming the Demon God. With that understanding, hatred welled up inside him, alongside another emotion that evaded description. Just what was it that made his heart constrict so tightly now?

“...What’re ya so worked up for?” Somegorou said. He didn’t touch on Jinya’s murmur, perhaps understanding he’d get no answer.

Grateful to the man for not asking, Jinya took a deep breath. Cold, wintry air filled his lungs and was exhaled hot. He was calmer now. He said, “Natsu’s father drinks this liquor every night.”

“That missy’s, you say? I see... That’s not good.” Somegorou’s expression changed as he finally understood the reason Jinya was acting so hastily. Jinya had just seen someone become a demon. It was easy to imagine what might happen to other drinkers of the liquor. After a moment of hesitation, he firmly said, “In that case, go. I’ll handle this fellow myself.”

That was kind of him, but the demon was a tough opponent in its own right. Even if Somegorou was a demon hunter, he was still a human. Could Jinya leave him be? “Akitsu Somegorou...”

“Oh c’mon, don’t give me that look. Ya really think I could ever lose to the likes of this demon?” Somegorou smiled cheerfully, despite them still being in the middle of a battle. “Humans are far more tenacious than you think.” He pulled a dagger out of his robes and showed it to Jinya. It was double-edged and only about one shaku long. It was hardly a proper weapon, and Somegorou’s martial arts skills were only average. That really wouldn’t give him an advantage in this fight. “Go on now, head off to that missy’s place.”

“But—”

“I’ll be fine. The techniques of the Akitsu aren’t so weak that I’d fall to this demon.” Somegorou’s gaze turned fierce. Perhaps that was an attempt to reassure Jinya. To hesitate any further would be rude to the man. What was more, as he was now, Jinya lacked the mental composure to fight effectively. The correct decision was clear.

“...Thank you.”

Jinya left Somegorou and the storehouse behind. He heard a loud sound behind him, likely Somegorou stopping the demon as it attacked.

“Oho, you’re really antsy to fight, huh?” Somegorou said to the demon. “The missy’s place is Sugaya, right? I’ll head over as well once I’m finished here.”

Hearing those nonchalant words, Jinya sped up. Not wanting to let Somegorou’s kindness go to waste, he ran into the night, treading snow as he went.

He was often too slow when it mattered.

The streets of Edo were buried in white, and the passing winds were as cutting as a blade. Even now, the snowfall showed no sign of stopping, and the night was bathed in gray.

Jinya crunched over packed snow as he ran to Sugaya. In his human past, there had been another night where he had run like this. However, back then he had failed to arrive in time, and the woman he both loved and considered dear family lost her life. Despite all his efforts and haste, he often arrived too late when it mattered.

Even so, he ran.

He ran for the father he abandoned. He ran for the girl who might have been family in another life. There was nothing he stood to gain from this running—it was too late for that—but he ran anyway, tearing from the way of life he thought was his everything. Jyuuzou and Natsu were undeniably a family, even if they didn’t know how to approach one another sometimes. Jinya was sure of this and was happy for them. That was why he ran to them now, even if he didn’t understand his own actions.

The snow snagged at his feet. The wind cut his skin. His chilled body was dull and heavy. But he ignored it all and ran.

That nostalgic home eventually came into sight. A feeling of dread flared up inside him as he saw Sugaya without any lights lit. Without knocking, he rammed the door to the building at full force. The latch snapped, and he broke through. He had an idea where the two would be at this time—Jyuuzou always drank in his room.

Relying on old memories, Jinya ran through the house. With every step, the building made an unpleasant, hollow sound. He pushed the thought aside as he arrived at his destination.

“Why...”

He heard Natsu’s trembling voice through the paper sliding door. With blood rushing to his head, he threw the door open and ran inside.

He first saw Natsu on the floor with her legs weak. He followed her shaky gaze and saw that reddish-brown figure.

“Jiiinnnn...taaahh...”

It was a hideous demon with festering skin. At that very moment, it reached a hand toward Natsu.

Dart—he had been too slow in the past, but he now had a power that let him move faster than anything. His wish to become stronger had gifted him this ability, though at the cost of several lives. He reached top speed with a single step and closed in on the demon faster than should be physically possible.

It wasn’t worth the trouble to draw his blade. Instead, he made a fist and swung at the demon’s hideous face without holding back.

“Haaaah!” he yelled. His fist landed true on the demon’s face. The blow carried both his inhuman strength and his abnormal speed. The demon didn’t stand a chance and was sent flying into the wall, against which it slouched weakly.

“A-ah...”

“Natsu, are you all right?”

She must have been terribly scared. Her eyes stared blankly, and her teeth chattered.

He moved to stand between her and the demon, warily watching the latter. Slowly, the demon got to its feet. His punch hadn't been enough.

"Jiin...taah..." The demon weakly groaned.

Jinya's heart raced. But with a demon before him, there was only one thing to do. He drew his sword and took up a stance. He calmed his heart and focused, ready to react to the demon's next move. He didn't notice the fact the demon spoke his old name, or at least that was what he told himself.

"D-don't, J-Jinya..."

The voice he least wanted to hear at this moment spoke up from behind. He didn't want to hear what she had to say. He already knew. But he could still believe otherwise so long as she didn't say it.

In a voice stretched to its limit, Natsu wailed, "That demon is Father!"

Ah, yet again. Yet again he was too slow.

A paper swallow was exactly what it sounded like: a paper toy cut in the shape of a swallow, tied to a stick by a string to be waved around. As both his paper swallow and his dog spirits were made of paper—a lightweight material—Somegorou could easily carry them around and often made good use of them. His old dog spirits had been taken from him by Jinya, but at the end of the day, they were just artifact spirits of papier-mâché hariko dolls. He easily found replacements.

His swallow cut, and his hounds gnawed. Together, they allowed him to fight demons from a distance. This particular demon, however, swept his beasts away with ease. It took damage as it did so, but not enough for its movements to be affected.

His dog spirits had a moderate regenerative ability and strong senses that helped target the enemy. His paper swallow had speed and the ability to spin without slowing down. However, they both lacked the sheer power needed to

finish this demon off.

The demon charged forward with a speed unthinkable for its size. This was problematic for Somegorou, as he was not too well versed in the martial arts. He couldn't let the demon get within striking distance. He kept the demon in check with his dog spirits and paper swallow, making distance where he could. This small game of back-and-forth, approaching and retreating, had been going on for a while.

"Hmm, I can't play along with ya forever..." Somegorou mused. If it came down to stamina, the demon was certain to be the victor. At this rate, Somegorou would eventually fall behind and be killed, but his air of total composure didn't crumble even with that knowledge.

"I suppose I have to end this quick after all. Good thing I sent Jinya off." There were two reasons Somegorou let Jinya leave. The first was out of kindness for the ronin and his concern for Natsu. The second was because he wanted no witnesses to this fight. "After all, trump cards are trump cards precisely because they're kept hidden."

Even if the two were better acquainted now, Jinya was still a demon. The day they'd have to fight could still come, which made Somegorou think twice about showing his entire hand. But with Jinya now gone, Somegorou could display his full strength. He held his dagger in hand. With this, he was at his strongest.

"Let's get to it."

Back when the Qing dynasty was still known as the Tang dynasty, its sixth emperor—Xuanzong—caught a sickness and was bedridden. Amid high fevers, he had a dream. In it, he saw malevolent demons rampant in the palace and possessing him. He presumed the malevolent demons were the cause of his sickness, eating away at his body. But a fearsome great demon then appeared from nowhere and easily caught all the malevolent demons and devoured them.

Xuanzong asked the great demon who he was, and the great demon said he was Shouki. *"I once aspired to become a civil servant but failed to pass the examination. In my shame, I committed suicide in the court. The Founding Emperor gave me a noble burial, however, so I've now come to repay the favor."*

Xuanzong awoke from his dream to find his sickness cured. Moved by what he had seen in the dream, he ordered a well-known painter by the name of Wu Daozi to paint Shouki.

When it was done, he stated that it matched what he had seen exactly. He went on to declare Shouki a god, and in time Shouki became worshipped as a god of plague-quelling. His tale eventually reached Japan, where dolls with his likeness were made for Boys' Day (now known as Children's Day) to ward off demons.

The dagger in Somegorou's hand was originally made for such a Shouki doll. The artifact spirit within it was Shouki—the plague-quelling, demon-slaying demon god himself.

“Come forth, Shouki-sama.”

A great, bearded demon with a ferocious gaze appeared. He wore the gold-embroidered garb of a civil servant and held a sword of the same design as Somegorou's dagger.

The air began to feel warmer despite winter's chill, an illusion given off by Shouki's intimidating presence. The opposing demon seemed to sense this was no ordinary foe and warily sidled closer. Then, it bolted forward to attack Shouki. All its muscles came alive at once. Its back arched like a bow as it fired off a punch like an arrow.

A dull sound echoed in the small storehouse. The demon's fist landed squarely, but Shouki didn't budge in the slightest.

“That ain't gonna cut it,” Somegorou said confidently, having known full well this would happen.

It should be said that Shouki had no special abilities of his own. Unlike the other artifact spirits like the lucky sparrow's ability to raise defenses, the dog spirits with their regeneration, and the clam shell's mirages, Shouki was without any special power. He hadn't the range of the paper swallow, and the dagger needed to summon him was fairly heavy and somewhat difficult to use. Despite all that, Shouki remained Somegorou's trump card.

Shouki suddenly raised his arms before coming down on the demon's head in

one fluid motion.

“Sorry, but this fight’s over.”

Shouki’s blade moved faster than the eye could follow. In its wake, nothing remained. The demon’s head hadn’t been bisected but erased.

To repeat, Shouki had no special abilities of his own. He was just powerful, plain and simple. That was all Shouki needed to be.

The demon collapsed a moment after, a white vapor rising from it. All that was left was to wait for the corpse to fade.

“Ugh. Kinda feels wrong to kill someone like this.” Somegorou had just been talking to the store owner, so he felt some misgivings about killing him even after he had become a demon. With a pained look, he watched the corpse fade, only turning around when it was completely gone.

“I’m sure Jinya’s got a handle on things, but I better hurry.”

He left the storehouse behind and made for Sugaya. A slight frown remained on his face as he realized this incident would leave him with a bitter aftertaste. His steps felt heavy, and not just because of the snow.

His foe was not particularly strong. It was far slower and weaker than the demon he had fought in the storehouse earlier. It lacked technique and intelligence and should’ve been trivial to deal with.

And yet Jinya could not bring himself to dodge fully.

A punch landed. Blocking with his left arm, he heard flesh tear and bone grate—even a weak demon was still a demon, after all.

He counterattacked with his sword. Too slow. Yarai, which had cut through countless demons before, weakly sliced through empty air.

“Damn...it...” His breathing was ragged. His legs and arms felt heavy. His body wouldn’t move as he willed it.

Jinya had already exchanged a number of blows with the demon. He was covered in wounds, but the demon hadn’t suffered a single scratch. This was a

pathetic display from Jinya—it could not be called a fight at all.

He tried to steady his breathing, but the demon gave him no time to recover. He could see the demon's movements. He could even react. He took up a stance, stepped back, and raised his sword. He just needed to follow through by bringing down his sword full force on the demon's unguarded head. The demon wouldn't even try to dodge. It could all be over, simple as that.

But instead, Jinya remembered how gentle the man could be despite his reticence. Hesitation stayed his blade, and the demon's fist swung past it.

“Gagh, pah!”

Jinya had been happy to learn the father he abandoned had found new family, and that very happiness gave him solace. He felt redeemed by it—the fact that he could be happy for Jyuuzou proved Jinya had once been his son, at least. Even if he had been an ungrateful one. When the two had finally met again after many, many years, Jyuuzou had said to him: *Natsu and I may not be connected by blood, but I treasure her as much as I would my own child. Protect her well.* The meaning that lay hidden in those words wasn't lost on Jinya. Jyuuzou wasn't trying to express how important Natsu was to him but how much he still cared for his son.

“Nnngaaah!” His sword, swung in desperation, hit nothing. Perhaps he wasn't trying to hit anything in the first place. His sword pathetically sliced empty air.

Between swings, a fist landed in his gut. A number of his organs burst, and the taste of iron flooded his mouth. He painfully coughed up blood.

His consciousness was turning hazy. His feet wouldn't budge. The demon saw the opportunity and attacked. By the time Jinya understood it was coming, it was too late. His body danced in the air as he flew and slammed into the wall. A dull pain spread across his back and he leaned against the wall, sliding down. His fingertips felt numb, and he couldn't even lift his head, much less his body.

“**Jinn...taa...**” Even without sight, he knew the demon was near. It groaned as it prepared to eat its prey.

“Agh...” Soon he would be dead, and he couldn't do a thing about it. How pathetic he was, he thought ruefully. He'd sworn to return to Kadono and stop

the Demon God one day. He had killed many with his blade, trampled lives, devoured demons for power—by all means, he should have been stronger than he was in the past.

So why couldn't he fight now? He had killed so many to get this far, so why couldn't he kill one single demon now?

Jinya had become a demon, but he hadn't fully abandoned his human heart. And right now, that very human heart was driving him into a corner. Oh, how weak he was.

“Argh...gh...”

His fingers brushed against something. A bottle. Snow's Memory? He hadn't the strength to even reach out and confirm his suspicions. He couldn't even move a finger at this point. All the talk of stopping the Demon God and making things right had been hot air. He'd managed to deceive himself thus far, but he was ultimately nothing more than a man of low caliber.

A sense of despondency overwhelmed him. He was tired, so very tired. Perhaps if he just let himself go now, he could be at peace for all eternity.

“You're the same as me, in the end. We both chose to stick to the way of life we've committed to instead of acting on our feelings for one another. But...”

The soft fragrance of liquor wafted clear, somehow reminding him of a nostalgic woman in his past.

How strange it was. Back then he didn't drink at all, yet the smell of liquor now made it feel like she was here with him, reaching out with her hand.

A fire was lit in him. It was faint, so terribly faint, but his defeated heart indeed stirred again.

Ah. Of course. How could he have forgotten? He was not allowed to fall here, not when his desire had yet to be achieved. He did not have the freedom to change his way of life, not after coming this far. But most importantly, to change how he lived now would sully the memory of all that brought him to this point.

“Gnnuaaaaaah!” His hand squeezed the bottle of Snow's Memory, and he

willed his aching body to move. It hurt, but he told his body to move anyway. It was impossible, but he willed it regardless. He was not allowed to die here. He could not allow the vow he'd sworn to be broken.

His body groaned. He couldn't put strength into anything. He felt like he'd crumple and fall if he let go at all. Even so, he forced himself to stand.

"F-Father, no! Stay away from me!"

By the time he heard Natsu's voice, he was finally on his feet. It appeared the demon had changed targets. She was trembling in a corner of the room as Jinya approached. With heavy steps, he managed to walk over and block the demon's path.

The demon glared at him with anger.

"J-Jinya."

He didn't respond to Natsu and broke open the top of the liquor bottle with his fingers. He roughly gulped down its contents, spilling some in the process. The liquor passing through his throat was cold. It tasted like water.

"So weak..." His impression of it was the same as when he first drank it. It was a nostalgic-tasting, weak liquor. He now understood why. Snow's Memory created demons by implanting hatred. He, who was used to a more potent brand of his own, found the liquor's flavor weak.

"I can feel it now..." He tossed the empty bottle aside, causing it to shatter.

It lacked the intensity of what he felt back then, but hatred unmistakably stirred in him now. Hatred for his sister, and hatred for his own pathetic self.

"Ah..."

He hated himself to no end. He was weak, almost giving up simply because his father had become a monster.

"Natsu..." he called her name, but no words followed.

I'll save you. I'll protect you. It'll be okay. You're safe now.

He couldn't say those words. They'd be meaningless from him, a man who had failed protecting a single thing. To think he could protect someone now

would be a lie.

So instead, he'd do what needed to be done.

His left arm twinged. It made a gruesome noise as his body began to change. His skin turned swarthy, like dull metal, and his left arm swelled terribly as it turned reddish-black. The right side of his face looked like a black metal mask, making his right eye stand out. And, of course, his eyes were red like the color of rust.

"I won't ask for your name. To slay demons is my only duty."

No matter how much time passed, killing was all he was good for anyway.

7

HE WANTED to become stronger.

He thought he would be able to protect all that was dear to him if he were.

"A-ah..."

Jinya didn't need to turn around to know what kind of look was on Natsu's face—it was clear from her terrified voice.

He couldn't let her be killed by a demon, and he didn't want to witness a father killing his own daughter, so he chose to reveal his true self. Did that mean he fought out of compassion? How arrogant, if so. He knew his compassion was worthless, and yet he did not feel like fleeing.

"How ironic," he said. He stared unblinking at the asymmetrical body of the demon before him. Its warped body had a disproportionate left arm, similar to Jinya's. For both the father and son to wind up as demons of similar shape was, indeed, ironic.

Looking back on it, Jyuuzou had really lived a life full of nothing but suffering at the hands of demons. His wife was raped by a demon, then killed birthing a demon child. His son ran off with a demon, and now he himself had become a demon and lost his mind. And at the end of it all, he was to be killed by a

demon.

“Demons...must be slain...” Jinya focused strength into his left arm. He murmured to himself, as though to reaffirm there was no other option available. His will was so feeble it wouldn’t stand unless vocalized. He took up a stance, trying to hide his shamefully weak heart.

Jinya kept his right arm loosely before him, still holding his sword. He would normally take his favorite stance, with his sword held horizontally to the side, but when he was in demon form, his left arm was a greater weapon than a sword. He was better off fighting with both arms independently.

His stance was full of vulnerabilities. The demon glared at Jinya with eyes ripe with hatred and approached with unfiltered bloodlust, without a care for its safety. But Jinya’s attacks wouldn’t intentionally miss like they did before.

“Haah!” He closed the distance to the demon, grabbed it by the head, and slammed it full force into the ground. The tatami at their feet warped, and the demon’s head caved in a little, but the floor had definitely taken the brunt of the damage. It gave way, yet the demon’s head remained intact. Jinya lifted the demon and threw it against the wall and out into the courtyard. The demon quickly got up, but it didn’t move. It just stood there watching Jinya.

At the end of the day, it was nothing more than a lesser demon: weak and unremarkable. Jinya didn’t like to toy with his enemies, so he decided to end things quickly. “...*Superhuman Strength.*”

With a bubbling sound akin to water being boiled, his left arm started to grow. His arm’s very bone structure changed, and before long it was twice the size it was.

“I’ll make it quick.” He couldn’t save his father, but at least he could make his suffering short. *It’ll all be over before you even feel a thing.*

“Jin...taaa...”

That was just some groan, Jinya told himself. *Don’t dwell on it.* He took a deep breath and stepped out into the courtyard.

One step—how nostalgic. He had often played in this courtyard as a child.

Two steps—his father was always busy, yet he made sure to spend time with Jinya here. Jinya also had memories of running around the place with Suzune.

Three steps—he'd sat on this veranda with Natsu before, eating rice balls. Her awkward kindness had been so heartwarming then. Though plain, the rice balls tasted wonderful.

Four steps—he would take all these memories and destroy them by his own hand. He might regret it someday, but his decision was made.

Five steps, six—he closed in.

The demon's legs trembled. Understanding it couldn't flee, it made one last desperate attack. **"Jin...taaaaa!"**

Jinya's heart went ice-cold. That allowed him to follow the demon's movements clearly. He slowly pulled back his left arm and tensed his back as much as he could. The demon charged straight toward him. Jinya waited for the instant it entered his range and—"Farewell, Father."

He stepped in and swung his massive arm. His back muscles released all their pent-up energy at once, and his fist barreled through the demon, destroying its top half.

The warmth Jinya felt splattered across his fist felt keenly of death. A white vapor rose from the now-collapsed demon. It was nothing more than a pile of flesh at this point, the damage done rendering it unrecognizable. There was nothing of his father left in the corpse, and Jinya was the one responsible for that. He didn't feel regret, however—he couldn't allow himself to. The most he could allow himself to do was bear the weight of those he killed.

He exhaled a sigh, then slowly breathed in winter's cold air. He forced a semblance of calmness onto his face, then turned his back on Jyuuzou's corpse.

"Natsu...?" he said, noticing she had stepped out into the courtyard as well. She still trembled slightly and stood in shock with her gaze cast downward. That was understandable, given that her father just tried to kill her.

"It's okay. It's over now," Jinya said in reassurance. He walked closer but was stopped by the words she barely managed to squeeze out.

“Stay away...”

Her trembling grew greater. He wondered what could be wrong, then he looked into her eyes and understood all at once. Her eyes were clouded, not with fear but with a different emotion he knew well. “Stay away from me you monster!”

Jinya completely froze at those words, feeling their clear hatred directed his way. He hadn’t forgotten he was a demon, of course. He had just forgotten what that meant.

He once had a friend who managed to fall in love with and marry a human despite being a demon. He knew a demon who had become family with a human. He had even fought alongside a demon hunter as an equal while being acknowledged as a demon himself. But those were all exceptions. To most humans, demons were beings to be slain. Natsu’s reaction was only natural. Man and demon were at constant odds with one another and could never truly coexist. Spending all these years living among humans had made Jinya mistakenly think he had been accepted.

“You...you killed him. My father, you...” Natsu sputtered. Jinya recalled that she had not tried Snow’s Memory back in Kihee when it was offered around. This hatred of hers was her own.

He had wanted to protect her. But she only saw him as the monster that killed her father. How had this come to be?

So things came to an end. He had failed to protect anything. He was a witless excuse of a man playing the role of a comical jester. But perhaps that was just things as usual for him.

“Oh, Jinya.”

After Jinya left Sugaya and stood dazed in the snowy night for a while, Somegorou belatedly came along.

“Tough fight?” he asked.

“Yeah. Enough that I’d probably be better off dead.”

“Is that so? Must’ve been quite somethin’ if even a guy like you’s saying that.” Somegorou seemed to be implying something. Perhaps the scars on Jinya’s body led him to imagine a fierce fight, or maybe the expression on Jinya’s face was just that telling. Jinya didn’t know which it was. He didn’t much care to know, for that matter. Somegorou continued, “I take it you’re all finished here, since you’re outside?”

“...Yeah. Now all that’s left is to take care of the source.”

The conversation petered out. Endless snowfall continued to bury Edo. Jinya dimly gazed out at the gray townscape and wished the snow would bury him too. He had been wearied to the point of thinking such nonsense.

In Sagami province, there is a mountain called Oyama that towers over its surroundings. Its beauty is comparable to that of Mount Fuji, and it has been a subject of mountain worship by commoners since antiquity. At its summit is the main Afuri Shrine, around its halfway point is the sub-Afuri Shrine, and further down is Oyama Temple. Oyama Mountain is also known as Rainfall Mountain, and it has been worshipped since long ago by farmers who believed the land to be the home of a rainmaking god.

“Hey, slow down a bit, will ya? You don’t hafta walk so fast.”

Again, it had snowed the whole day, and their surroundings were dark in the twilight hours. The two trekked the mountain path without being able to see what was ahead of them. Jinya wanted to reach the liquor spring as fast as possible, even if it meant a grueling pace, but Somegorou was having none of that.

“Weren’t you the one who said the sooner the better?” Jinya said.

“Well, sure, but we’ve been marching along for days! I’m just a normal human; my limits aren’t the same as yours.”

That was a fair point. The difference in stamina between humans and demons was great. Jinya slowed his pace a little.

The clouds hanging overhead were turning dark. It would be fully night by the time they reached their destination.

“Night’s almost here,” Jinya said.

“Sheesh, I get it already, I’m slow. Actually, wait, doesn’t this work out fine? We’d have to wait for night anyway.”

That was true. The supernatural generally only showed at night. Their pace might indeed be perfect then.

“Say, there’s been somethin’ I’ve been meaning to ask you about,” Somegorou said between gasps of air.

“What?” Jinya replied with an exasperated sigh. He considered talking to be a waste of energy. It’d be more efficient to trek in silence. But he heard the man out for now.

“You have a rough idea of what Snow’s Memory is, don’tcha?” Somegorou said, hitting the mark with the casualness of an afternoon chat. Jinya answered with silence, after which Somegorou boasted, “I knew it! I just got that feelin’, ya know? ...So, tell me, what is it?”

Jinya had originally planned on keeping silent about knowing what Snow’s Memory probably was, but with Somegorou’s expression turning serious, he just knew he couldn’t talk his way out of answering. With a small sigh, he gave in. “Do you know how liquor is made?”

“Huh? Well, of course. They steam rice, let mold grow on it, and then toss the result in water.”

“There’s a bit more to it than that, but yes. It stands to reason then that Snow’s Memory is made in a similar way.”

This was nothing more than a theory of Jinya’s, so there could be some parts that were inaccurate. But he was confident he had the general idea figured out, particularly when it came to the base ingredient used and the culprit who made the liquor. In fact, he was *certain* he had those two right.

“Yeah, no way,” Somegorou said. “That’s crazy talk. How would you get a spring full of liquor by just throwing in some moldy steamed rice?”

“I never said rice had to be used.”

Somegorou gave Jinya a perplexed look.

In truth, Jinya hadn't a clue how one would go about making a spring of liquor. But he did have an idea how one might make a liquor that turned people into demons. "There's a thing called mixed liquor where people steep fruits, fragrant plants, herbs, and so on to add flavor to alcohol."

"Oh, like plum wine? ...Ah, that's what you're getting at."

The easiest way to add the properties of something into liquor was to let it steep for a long time. It made sense to think the same process was used for Snow's Memory.

Somegorou grimaced. "So there's somethin' that turns people into demons steepin' in that spring."

"Right. Likely the corpse of someone who died an unnatural death, leaving them with unfinished business."

Somebody's heart was steeped in the liquor, which was what caused negative emotions to form in those who drank the alcohol. In plain words, Snow's Memory was a liquor made from the lingering attachments of a dead person.

Jinya said, "If things can harbor emotion and become artifact spirits, then it follows that corpses can harbor emotion as well."

"I see. And the one who set this all up is our mysterious blonde woman?"

"Most likely."

Obviously, just putting a corpse into a spring wouldn't turn it into liquor. The blonde-haired woman did something more to make the water into Snow's Memory.

If that blonde-haired woman was who Jinya thought she was, then he also had a good idea whose corpse was in the spring. He originally thought the alcohol tasted so familiar because it was made out of hatred, but the truth might just lie somewhere else.

Somegorou said, "Pretty horrific stuff. I wonder, just what kind of grudges would ya have to die with to have emotions that turn people into demons?"

"*Grudges* might not be the right word. It's not as if the corpse intended to make a liquor that turns people into demons, after all."

“Oh yeah? How do you figure?”

“I smell something. We’re near.” Jinya ignored Somegorou’s follow-up question and continued deeper along the mountain path. He parted branches to reach a clearing halfway up the mountain.

“Oh...” Who’s to say whose awed murmur that was. The two both found the sight breathtaking.

The faint scent of alcohol drifted through the air. The forest canopy was absent above, allowing for tufts of snow to dance down from gray clouds. An abrupt wind blew, rustling the foliage.

Decaying trees surrounded a translucent spring. Lights danced above the water’s surface—fireflies, or maybe will-o'-the-wisps. The thick clouds above blotted out any stars. It was just the ceaseless snowfall and the faint, softly swaying lights. The beauty of the scene was otherworldly, like they had somehow crossed into the world beyond and stumbled onto the shores of Higan.

“Well, this is just...incredible,” Somegorou said absently. It was hard to believe a spring full of something as accursed as demon-making liquor could have such spectral beauty.

Jinya was similarly stunned. He had never seen beauty like this before, and yet it was somehow nostalgic to him. He became all the more certain his theory was correct.

“It’s hard to imagine a grudge could have made a sight this beautiful,” Somegorou said.

“I told you so.” Jinya’s voice was gentle, enough so to surprise even himself. He was not the Yasha guardian of rumor now; he was just your ordinary, somewhat-reticent youth. “The liquor only made people demons because it was the easiest way to achieve her goal. Or maybe the blonde-haired demon added something. I don’t know. The only thing I do know is that there was no malice in the action.”

He stepped into the spring. The liquor was freezing cold, but he continued onward regardless, making his way to the center. “She just wanted to be found.

That's all." He stooped down and reached out, carefully bringing the corpse sleeping at the bottom into his arms. "She incited hatred and turned people into demons..." He touched the cold white bones gently, as though afraid to break them. A loving smile formed on his face. "...Because she believed she'd be found if she did, by the one who hunted demons." The corpse had no skull.

Those who drank Snow's Memory and became demons always targeted Jinya over others. That was because she compelled them to. Her feelings had grown twisted over the years, giving rise to a liquor that birthed demons, so she wanted him to put a stop to what she had become. Not just anyone, but *him*. She believed he would be the one to come for her.

"Even as you are now, you still call for me..."

But of course, Jinta. The smell of liquor muddled his senses, making him think he heard a gentle voice. The liquor permeated through his body. The emotion dissolved in the liquor that incited anger in people only brought up nostalgia in Jinya. *I'm sorry. I ended up hurting you.*

"I am a shrine maiden guardian. It is my purpose to fight for you."

...Thank you.

He showed her his old smile, not as Jinya, but as Jinta. She accepted it, and her corpse turned to dust, which was then scattered into the air by a winter wind. The smell of alcohol began to ebb.

Her final attachments to the world must've vanished. With her soul returning to the heavens, the spring would return to what it once was.

Farewell, Jinta.

"...Farewell." He was reluctant to part with her. Even if her voice was nothing more than an auditory hallucination, he had found it soothing. Even if she was just a corpse, he had gotten to hold her once again. But the sensations he felt were slipping away. Cruel reality was returning, and it chilled his heart more than winter's cold ever could.

But even so, he would not chase after her memory. She was gone. Reaching out for her would be fruitless, and he could not linger in the past forever. In fact, neither of them was the type to do so, and it was the very reason they had

loved each other. Even if she wasn't by his side, he wouldn't step away from this way of life he knew.

"...Rest well, Shirayuki." His words faded into the distant night sky as pure-white snow danced down. He looked up to the heavens from the spring. The pale moon was nowhere to be seen, hiding itself behind gray clouds. Even so, he recalled the night sky he saw back then and bid his farewell.

A few days after they returned to Edo, Jinya and Somegorou met up at a teahouse in Fukagawa. They sat on a bench out front and chatted over tea.

"There have been fewer rumors of demons and general violence since then. I'd say we can consider the whole incident resolved," Somegorou said. With a jovial smile, he stuffed his cheeks with dango.

Snow's Memory was now completely gone from Edo. The bottles that had been sold had all turned to water, perhaps because the liquor's source had disappeared. Naturally, this caused many to think they had been scammed, and now there were very few interested in buying the liquor.

"Everyone still seems on edge, though," Jinya said.

"Well, there's not much that can be done about that. It's just a sign of the times, ya know?" Somegorou took a huge bite and gulped down his last dango. He sipped his tea, then shrugged noncommittally. "It's hard to keep ya head up high when the elites at the top have completely folded to foreign powers. That said, it's not like the country could've kept its borders closed forever. Things change with time; that's just how it is. Either way, it's got nothing to do with Snow's Memory."

Come to think of it, the streetwalker had brought up the black ships that came to Uraga. The shogunate seemed unable to deal with foreign powers. The Tokugawa's power was slowly waning, and the country was on the verge of an era of upheaval. Even without demons, the people of Edo had enough to worry about.

"All we can do is slay demons," Somegorou said. "How the world changes over time is out of our hands."

“That’s true.” Jinya was only good for fighting anyway; he hadn’t the strength to challenge anything else. The same could be said for Somegorou. As individuals, they were helpless before great change. Though vexing, the matter was truly out of their hands.

“That’s quite the long face ya got there.”

“Ah, yeah...” Jinya’s mind wasn’t preoccupied with the great changing of eras but a tiny memory from the past. Shirayuki’s body was used to make Snow’s Memory. But when Suzune left Kadono, she was holding Shirayuki’s head. That meant there was a possibility Shirayuki’s corpse would be misused again, and that destroyed all the joy Jinya would have felt over resolving this incident. “I was just thinking of that blonde-haired demon.”

“Ah, the mastermind of this incident. You think she might plot something again?”

“I do.” Jinya meant it. He lived only with thoughts of stopping the Demon God. Hatred still smoldered inside him even now.

“Well, no use worryin’ about it. Anyway, thanks for treating me. I’ll leave the bill here.” Somegorou, knowing nothing of Jinya’s ties to the blonde-haired demon, didn’t press him on it. He could probably sense something was off, but he was kind enough not to ask. “I better be headin’ back to Kyoto soon. Can’t let my masters worry too much about me, y’know? Let’s meet if you’re ever in the area. Just spread word you’re lookin’ for Akitsu Somegorou, and I’ll come find you.”

“Will do, if I ever get the chance.”

“Sounds good. Ta-ta, then.” With a casual farewell, the man briskly took off. Jinya watched him go as he took a sip. His tea had already gone cold.

“Oh, Jinya-kun. It’s been a while since you’ve dropped by.”

Around midday, Jinya visited Kihee and was greeted by Ofuu’s graceful smile. Seeing her usual kindness again made his heart feel a little lighter.

“Oh, heya, Jinya-kun. I’d say this is the longest you’ve been away yet,” the

restaurant owner said.

“I’ve been busy,” Jinya replied. He didn’t feel like explaining any further. He took a seat, and the restaurant owner began preparing a kake soba without even waiting for Jinya’s order. The restaurant owner himself hadn’t lived an ordinary life either and knew better than to probe.

“Excuse me. Oh, Jin-dono. It’s been a while.” The entrance curtains parted as Naotsugu walked into the restaurant. “I take it you’ve been busy with some particularly troublesome work?”

“That’s about right, yeah.”

Naotsugu seemed more cheerful than usual, perhaps because he was seeing a good friend after a while. He casually sat with Jinya at his table, ordered his soba, and chatted. “It’s a good thing you came by. I was starting to get lonely, as nobody else has dropped by lately.”

“Nobody?”

“Nobody. I haven’t seen Zenji-dono and Natsu-dono come by recently.”

“And with Jinya-kun gone as well, business has been about as dry as it gets!” The restaurant owner laughed as he made soba. It seemed the restaurant was doing as poorly as ever. “I wonder where that Natsu-chan and Zenji-kun have been, though. Have you heard anything from them, Ofuu?”

“No, not in particular.”

The father-daughter pair shared a curious look.

Jinya said nothing. He couldn’t bring himself to speak.

“There we go—two kake soba ready.”

“Coming!”

The soba was served in no time at all. Steam rose alongside the savory smell of broth. Jinya thought the soba looked absolutely delectable in this cold weather. Naotsugu seemed to think the same, reaching for his chopsticks right away.

“Ah... Nothing quite warms you up on cold days like hot soba,” Naotsugu

remarked.

Jinya slurped down some of his soba but found the taste strange. “Hmm...”

“Is something the matter?” the restaurant owner asked.

“I feel like your soba’s gotten worse.” The flavor tasted weaker than before.

“Huh?” The restaurant owner seemed taken aback by the unexpected remark. Jinya looked to Naotsugu for his opinion.

“It tastes fine to me. If anything, I feel like it’s getting progressively better.”

“Is that so... Must just be my imagination then.” Seeing that everyone was looking at him funny, Jinya said nothing further and continued to eat. His first visit to Kihee in a while ended up being a strange one. The broth really did taste weaker than before, though. Even though he ate it almost every day, it tasted so dull all of a sudden. And even after finishing the bowl, he couldn’t figure out why that was.

Edo Arc Final Chapter: Trailing Stupor

“THANKS FOR TAKING the trouble to help an old man out.”

In Sakaimachi, a blood-stained demon was said to appear every night. After taking a request to slay it from the ukiyo-e painter Saga Doshu, Jinya put an end to it and gave the area some peace. It hadn't been an easy fight, but it also hadn't been particularly difficult. He got some sen coins for his trouble, and that was that.

“How about some tea?” Doshu offered.

“Sorry, I'll have to pass this time.”

“I see. A shame.”

Doshu was a friend of Jinya's foster father. Whenever the occasion arose, Jinya stopped by to hear some interesting stories from the old man. He passed up on the chance this time, however. He simply wasn't in the right mood.

Jinya gave a short bow and left the rowhouse behind. A cold wind blew the moment he stepped out. It was the height of winter, and the cold seeped all the way down to his bones. He generally wasn't fond of winters, as the weather made his body stiff and it was harder to grip his sword with numb fingers. But right now, with

how heated his head felt, winter's chill was pleasant. Breathing in the cold air cooled the heat inside him. It was the perfect way to sober up. The liquor from that night hadn't yet run its course through him.

The next day, Jinya went to Kihee to eat kake soba in the evening as usual. He could taste the broth again. The flavor had more or less returned.

He glanced around the restaurant and saw a couple of other people present. The restaurant had more customers these days, but Natsu and Zenji didn't come by anymore. He was used to that by now, though.

Some time had passed since the incident with Snow's Memory. Jinya lived the exact same life as he did before. Losing a couple of bonds changed little for him. So long as his goal remained the same, so would he.

One thing had changed, however. There were more incidents caused by demons lately. He had plenty of work thanks to that, but it was nothing to be pleased about. It just showed how much more unease the populace was feeling.

"Everything's been so expensive lately."

"I know, right? What the heck is the government doing?"

Jinya heard the other customers grumbling. He heard a lot of these complaints lately. Not too long ago, black ships from a foreign nation arrived, and the shogunate proved helpless to stop them. At first it seemed like a matter that had nothing to do with the common man, but that was not the case anymore, with public order so low and prices so high. There were even samurai dissatisfied with the current state of things.

"This is just a rumor I've heard, but apparently there are some people thinking of opposing the Shogun..."

Ever so slowly, the long-standing era of peace was beginning to show cracks. Jinya hadn't a clue what the future held for the world; he didn't even know what the future held for him. He did, however, feel the hardships of the times.

"Excuse me, I'd like to pay."

"That'll be eighteen mon."

It was a bit sad to think a mere price increase of two mon could have him so conscious of the state of the world.

Jinya finished his meal, then moved to leave. Before he could step out, however, a voice called out to him from behind.

"Jinya-kun, could you wait one moment for me?"

"Is something the matter?"

"No, I'd just like to walk with you for a bit."

It was a bit odd for Ofuu to step out while customers were still around. Jinya

gave the restaurant owner a glance.

The restaurant owner roared with laughter and said, "It's all right, I'm just sending her off to buy some things we've run short on."

Fukagawa hadn't been the safest of places lately. The restaurant owner was worried for his daughter's safety, even if he knew she was a demon.

"I see. I don't mind," Jinya said.

"Then shall we be off?"

The two stepped out into the street. The moon hung in a completely cloudless sky. Normally, they would talk about the flowers they saw as they walked along, but not today. Perhaps the cold was to blame, or perhaps it was the soft moonlight that put them in such a mood, but tonight they found themselves exchanging very few words. It was not awkward, however. Even in silence, Jinya felt comfortable. Perhaps it was the knowledge that she, too, was a demon. He didn't have to be on guard around her.

As though she had only just noticed, Ofuu said, "It's cold today, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

She smiled at his curt response. With some relief, she exhaled a white sigh. "... I see you're doing all right."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you've been working nonstop recently." Apparently, the frequency of jobs he'd been taking had worried her.

"Ah. I'm sorry. Did I make you worry?"

"Of course. It'd be a shame if one of our very few regulars got hurt," she said jokingly. The fact that she purposely said 'got hurt' instead of 'if we lost one of our very few regulars' didn't go unnoticed by him. She was kindly avoiding the topic of the two who stopped coming. He had to smile at how considerate she could be.

"I'll be heading back now," she said suddenly.

"What about your shopping?"

“I feel like doing it tomorrow.” She began to walk back the way they came.

It appeared the father-daughter pair were only trying to check in on Jinya. He had faced many trials and tribulations since coming to Edo, but he was also truly blessed to have met good people.

He was watching her go when, abruptly, she turned around.

“Do you remember what I said about the winter daphne?” she said. Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned back around and continued on her way.

Of course he remembered. The winter daphne was the flower that endured the harsh, cold winter so it could bloom and herald spring. It was no mystery why she brought it up now. Her message was clear: *Your pain now is so you can bloom beautifully later.*

He truly, truly was blessed to have met such good people. His liquor-addled mind was now suddenly clear again. He walked into the night, searching for a new rumor to pursue.

The world wasn’t so kind as to let everything go one’s way. That was a lesson he learned well early in life. He knew better than to let lost bonds slow him down. The blonde-haired demon was, without a doubt, trying to become a demon god. That thought stirred murky hatred deep inside him. He was in winter now, and his spring eagerly waited at the end of a long eternity.

Or perhaps... An idea crossed his mind. The arrival of the black ships had Edo in turmoil. Perhaps it was not just Jinya who was waiting out a harsh winter but the whole country itself. Perhaps its pain now was a necessary price for a coming spring.

He looked up at the night sky and saw a chill-inducing, cold moon. The streets of Edo, bathed in pale moonlight, appeared like a sickly, emaciated man.

It was year three of the Ansei era (1856 AD), winter. Edo was in the middle of what would later be known as the Bakumatsu—the end of the shogunate.

***To be continued in Sword of the Demon Hunter: Kijin Gentōshō - Bakumatsu
Arc: Logic of the AmanoJaku***

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Astrologers and practitioners of various esoteric arts, affiliated with the Heian court (794-1185 AD). Powerful onmyouji like Abe no Seimei were described in legends commanding spirit familiars or even gods, using talismans and arrays for spells, slaying demons, and exorcising spirits.
- [2.](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ken is equal to six shaku, with one shaku being just shy of one foot.
- [3.](#) Referring to Du Yu (杜宇), imperial regnal name Wang Di (望帝), from the Shu Kingdom in the region of modern-day Sichuan, sometime between 770 and 400 BCE.
- [4.](#) A time measurement only used in the Edo Period. One koku equals roughly two hours.
- [5.](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One gou is equal to 6.1 ounces.



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